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HOUSE MARTIN BY JOHN HARDING (WWW.BTO.ORG)



TEN years ago this month, the world woke to news that Ivory-billed Woodpecker, long thought extinct, had been rediscovered in the southern United States. Amid great fanfare, the Cornell

owned by commercial interests.

Perhaps the key point here is that, while there is an accepted peer-reviewed process for describing species new to science, rediscoveries lack the same procedural scrutiny. The Ivory-billed Woodpecker claims were central to more than \$20 million being spent by federal and state governments on recovery efforts before the saga descended into the realm of cryptozoology. In Australia, the future of the Night Parrot appears closely linked to the motives of its 'rediscoverer', who reportedly took thousands of dollars in admission fees at his last 'presentation' event but continues to keep most of the facts private.

These episodes point to a need for some kind of ornithological 'treasure trove' agreement, applicable internationally, which ensures that evidence for claimed rediscoveries is assessed and verified independently, and through which plans to protect such species are developed and publicly embraced. That way, such iconic birds on the edge surely have their best chance of survival.

Dominic Mitchell

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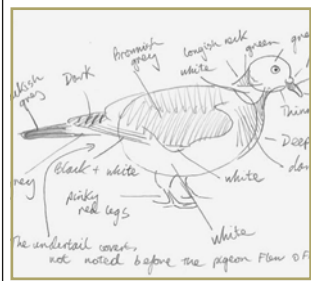
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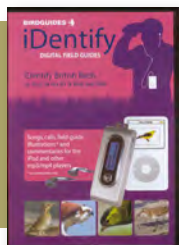
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Conflict of interest

As spring intensifies, birds become more territorial and many species come into conflict, as this remarkable shot of Great Spotted Woodpecker and Little Owl ably demonstrates.

After capturing the confrontation while birding in Worcestershire, photographer Ian Scofield said: "I had been sitting in a hide for around eight hours when the woodpecker and its young came into the area. A pair of Little Owls wanted to defend their location and this stand-off happened right in front of me and my camera. The whole episode lasted just two or three seconds before the woodpecker flew off."

The photo won the Wildlife with Wings photo competition organised by soft drinks producer Belvoir Fruit Farms, and judged by Butterfly Conservation Vice President Chris Packham. The competition was held to help raise funds to protect the endangered Grizzled Skipper in the East Midlands, and with many birders being butterfly aficionados this result will appeal to *Birdwatch* readers, too. ■



IAN SCOFIELD



FINDER'S REPORT

Shrike in hiding

A New Year visit to his in-laws produced a first for Spain for **Iain Hartley**, though the bird was frustratingly hard to pin down.



RAFAEL ARMADA
(WWW.RAFELARMADA.NET)

RICARD GUTIÉRREZ

Perched picturesquely at the top of a fruiting lemon tree, the shrike became distant but showy after proving extremely elusive when it was first discovered. Brown Shrike is found in central and eastern Russia, wintering in India, but the relatively balmy climate of Mediterranean southern Spain appears to have sufficed for this particular individual.

Brown Shrike: Deltebre, Catalonia, Spain, 31 December 2014-1 March 2015

WE tend to spend Christmas with my parents in north-east Scotland before travelling to Catalonia, Spain, to spend New Year and the Festival of the Three Kings with my wife's family. Fortunately for me, my wife is from Deltebre, a town in the centre of the Ebro Delta – quite simply one of the greatest places to watch birds in Europe.

The thousands of waterbirds are the obvious attraction but, with the Delta projecting 12 miles into the Mediterranean, migration periods can also be fantastic for passerines and raptors. The Ebro Delta Natural Park bird list is well over 300 species, but this is probably more an indication of the site quality rather than a high number of local birders. There are large areas that receive little or no coverage, providing plenty of opportunity to find interesting birds. Even in January there can be species you do not associate with winter in the northern Mediterranean, such as Black Stork, and one year even a Tawny Pipit.

I don't really have a local patch in Britain, but the Delta

serves well when visiting Spain. Although we only go a couple of times each year, my Catalan 'patch' list is now approaching 170 species. The highlights until recently included a Long-billed Dowitcher in 2011 and a beautiful Little Crane found by my wife – her proudest birding moment. However, these great birds were somewhat overshadowed by a very unexpected visitor first seen on New Year's Eve 2014.

We had arrived the previous evening, and since the weather was good I decided to go for a morning walk along the Ebro river. Although chilly, it was great to be out in the Mediterranean sunshine. All the usual species were present and active in the cool of the morning – including my second Delta Great Tit – but the highlight was a flock of Common Cranes flying over, another patch second. I was heading home for lunch when something different caught my eye among the sparrows.

The bird was clearly a shrike, but given the time of year and the fact that it did not look like a Red-backed, it definitely warranted a closer look. As it was midday, the light was pretty bright but the bird looked very dark and the head was

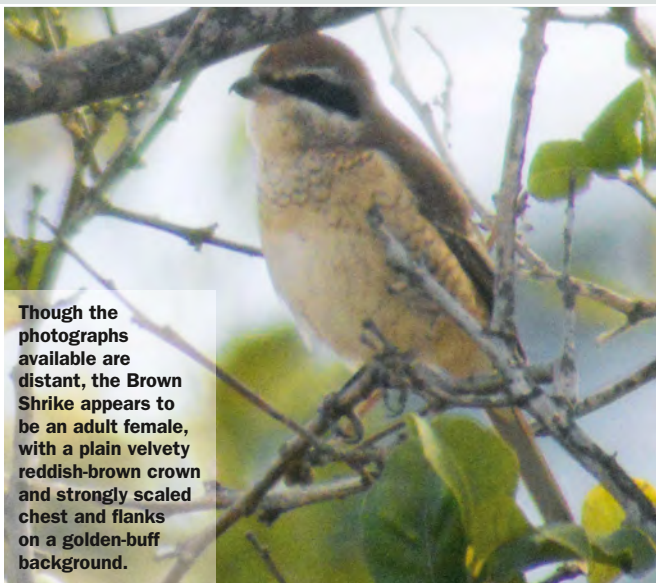
very strongly marked. The mask was much blacker than on a typical female or first-winter Red-backed, and I could see that the lores were fully black. The supercilium was strikingly white. The bird also appeared to have a substantially longer and thinner tail than Red-backed. In addition, I could not see any white in the wing or any obvious red in the tail that would have suggested Turkestan Shrike. For all intents and purposes, the bird looked like a Brown Shrike.

I watched it for less than two minutes before it disappeared, and I could not relocate it for the rest of the day. I sent my brief description to friends in Britain, including Mark Lewis who agreed that it sounded like a Brown Shrike, but also noted that my description was pretty sparse and I certainly didn't have enough for the record to be accepted – especially as Mark had confirmed that it would be a first for Spain. All I had was a dark brown shrike, which appeared very long tailed with striking facial markings.

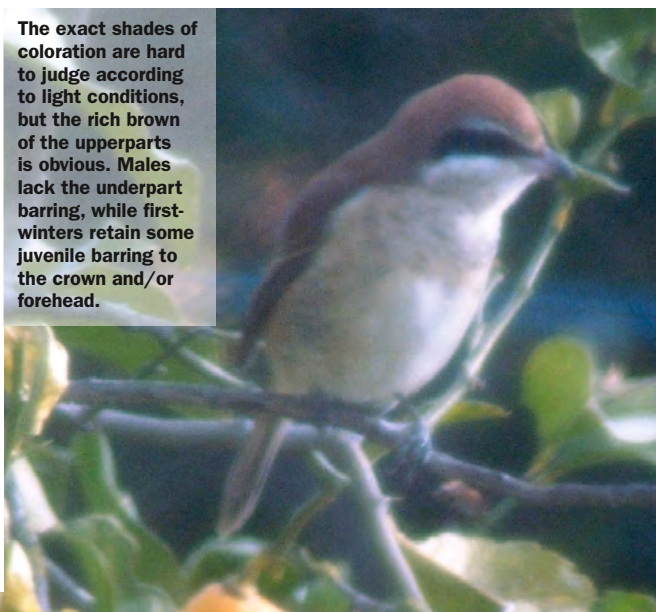
I tried to pass my description on to natural park staff but – not unreasonably – everyone was on holiday. With no one to relocate the bird, I started to doubt what I'd seen. With such bright sunshine,



RICARD GUTIÉRREZ



Though the photographs available are distant, the Brown Shrike appears to be an adult female, with a plain velvety reddish-brown crown and strongly scaled chest and flanks on a golden-buff background.



The exact shades of coloration are hard to judge according to light conditions, but the rich brown of the upperparts is obvious. Males lack the underpart barring, while first-winters retain some juvenile barring to the crown and/or forehead.

RICARD GUTIÉRREZ

RICARD GUTIÉRREZ

I began to wonder whether the bird really was strongly marked or whether the bright light could have stopped me from seeing red in the tail, which would have suggested Turkistan Shrike.

I searched extensively for the bird over the next week, spending more than 15 hours looking – all the time I had available between family commitments. I'd pretty much given up hope when, on 6 January, our last day in Deltebre, the bird reappeared in the same place. This time it was present for about 30 minutes, although it showed only intermittently. At one point it caught a large insect and showed really well fully out in the open on the ground, and at a distance of just 10 m.

I was able to confirm the features I'd first noted, as well as other aspects of the bird. The outer tail feathers were noticeably shorter than the central ones, while the underparts were a warm buff colour with fine brown vermiculations on the flanks.

I was desperate to get some photos of the bird but without my DSLR – we have too many presents to carry at this time of year – all attempts with my compact were rubbish; only the most generous of viewers would even consider the photos to show a shrike! Despite the lack of photographic evidence, with the help of Mark Lewis and BirdGuides, the information was passed on to Ricard Gutiérrez at Rare Birds in Spain.

Finding a national first should be a really exciting experience, but I found it quite stressful. Even

though I was happy with the identification, I kept trying to work out how I could be wrong. Before this sighting I'd never seen Brown Shrike or either form of Isabelline, and I was coming to realise how much more enjoyable it is to find a rare bird with friends, when you can share the identification – and the potential reputational liability of any terrible mistake!

Over the following week, Spanish birders searched for the shrike with no luck, with some people travelling long distances to look for the bird. While at least some people believed me, including Ricard, a single observer record of a national first from a foreign birder was never going to be accepted, and was probably considered dubious by many. However, the bird was finally relocated on 9 February by Ricard and Sergi Sales, close to where I'd first seen it some 40 days earlier. The identification was confirmed and a couple of days later the first really good photographs of the bird started to appear. I could finally relax.

Since the bird was relocated, it has been seen by several hundred people from as far afield as Asturias (which is a pretty big twitch in Spanish terms), and it has even appeared on Catalan TV and radio. My in-laws remain quite bemused by the whole thing and could not understand what a small brown bird was doing appearing on TV3 news. ■

For the most part, the Brown Shrike – a first for Spain – was difficult to view on the wasteground habitat, with birders having to peer at it through the lower half of a chicken-wire fence.



FINDER'S REPORT

Hide-and-seek Harlequin

A female Harlequin Duck played a game of cat and mouse with **Dean MacAskill**, in stark contrast to the showy and popular bird further south in Aberdeenshire.

Despite performing a frequent vanishing act, the female Harlequin Duck occasionally came close inshore. As the species pairs up in winter, it seems almost a shame that this bird will probably never meet the long-staying drake in Aberdeen.

BOTH PHOTOS: DEAN MACASKILL

Harlequin Duck: Brora, Highland, 17 February-10 March 2015

AT lunchtime at the Brora beach car park, the tide was high and a quick scan from my car of the rough seas revealed a few Long-tailed Duck and Common Scoter. I then saw what I initially thought was a female Velvet Scoter, but this bird looked far too small in comparison with the Common Scoter present offshore.

There was a large swell on the sea, but I soon had the bird in the scope. It then flew about 100 m south and became difficult to see because of the bright sunlit water – however, in flight it intriguingly showed no white in the wings.

I took my scope and walked very quickly south along the beach to get the light behind me. I got it in focus once more for a brief moment before it was spooked by an Otter, and flew north for approximately 600 m.

This small duck – all dark apart from a white spot on the ear coverts – now had me convinced it was a Harlequin Duck. The only problem was that, due to the light, I could not see the pale greyish patches above and below the

eye. I sent a text to Bob Swann, hoping that he would come over, but he was on the Isle of Lewis at the time. I put the news out as soon as I returned home. The next day, I searched the shore to the north of the river mouth but could not find it again.

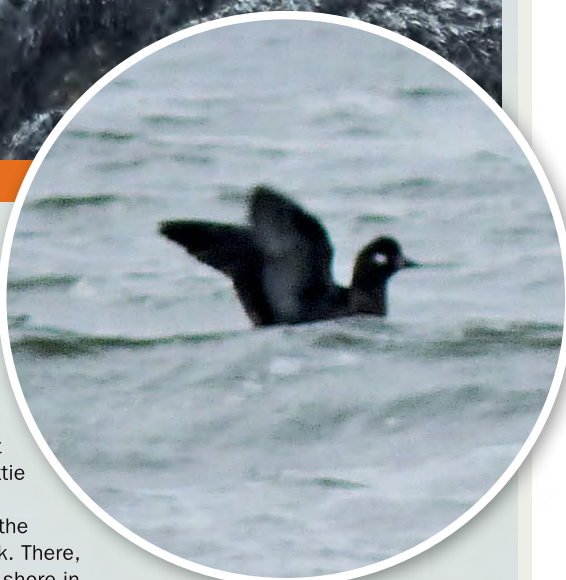
Back again on 22nd, accompanied by my friend Lorna, I scanned the area. As the weather was quite stormy, I had the car window open just enough to see, while keeping the worst of the sleet and snow out. About 20 minutes later, just as I was about to head home, I saw the dark head of a duck with a white spot on its ear coverts for a split second. I couldn't believe it! This time it flew south, and I asked Lorna if she could see the black dot flying away. She said that she could, but this remained her only sighting of the Harlequin Duck.

I briefly saw the bird feeding again on 25 February, and on 27th I searched the shore to the

south of the river, but there was no sign of it in the bay, about half a mile south of the old radio station. I went as far as Sputtie Burn, about a mile south of the beach car park. There, I scanned the shore in both directions, but still couldn't relocate the bird.

A scan of the sea revealed all the usual seaduck suspects, but still no Harlequin. Then, as I was packing my scope away, I saw it swimming along the edge of the rocks by the shore, right in front of me.

I grabbed my point-and-shoot camera with my pulse racing, as I knew the bird was close enough to get a decent record shot. I started photographing when I got



The absence of white on the wing first raised the suspicion that this bird was a female Harlequin Duck, as a drake would have had two small white markings on its upperwing, with more on its upper body, while Velvet Scoter (which also shows a white eye mask) would have had a large white secondary patch.

to the edge of the rocks, the only problem being that my hands were shaking so much that I didn't think I would manage a usable shot! When I finally checked my pictures, I saw that I had a couple of half decent – and, crucially, diagnostic – images.

Just as well, as the bird was not seen again until 10 March. ■

STATS & FACTS

First recorded: Filey, North Yorkshire, 'autumn' 1862

Last recorded: North Uist, Outer Hebrides, 18 February-1 June 2013, though there is currently a

long-staying bird in Aberdeenshire (see *Birdwatch* 272: 11)

Previous British records: 18

Previous Irish records: 0

Mega rating: ★★★★★



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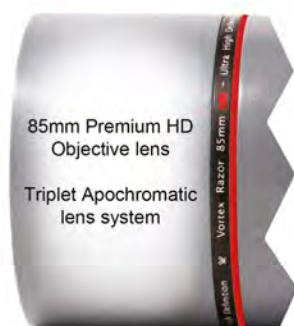
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Last of the 'Lady As'

Lady Amherst's Pheasant was previously accepted as a part of Britain's avifauna but, with an apparent terminal decline in population to the point where perhaps just one individual exists, was it ever truly self-sustaining?

ALL three pheasant species on the British list are introduced, with Pheasant well known and almost ubiquitous. However, there are two more exotic species which have attained their status by virtue of their supposedly sustainable populations in the country: Golden and Lady Amherst's Pheasants.

After the species' intentional introduction at Woburn in the 1890s, the main British population of Lady Amherst's Pheasant established itself along the Greensand Ridge of Bedfordshire, spreading naturally west into Buckinghamshire. The extensive mixed pine, Ash, oak and Beech woodlands in the area (with an introduced rhododendron understorey) appear to have made a passable analogue for its native deciduous forest and

bamboo thickets. However, similar habitat elsewhere in Britain seems to have not been able to sustain the numerous other introduction attempts that the species has been the subject of over the last two centuries.

Lady Amherst's Pheasant was added to the British Ornithological Union's (BOU) British list in 1971 on the basis of the Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire population, which by then was estimated to have reached up to 200 pairs during surveys at the time for the British Trust for Ornithology's first *Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland*.

By the late 1980s, the Bedfordshire population had already undergone a notable decline, with a male-heavy ratio of around 65-75 per cent (though



PHOTOS: JOSH JONES

This mature male Lady Amherst's Pheasant, photographed at an undisclosed site in Buckinghamshire this year, may well be the last individual to exist in the wild in Britain after a catastrophic decline.

females are much harder to detect), and there were apparently no more than 40 individuals by 2001. By 2008, just five male 'Lady As' remained, with two reported last year; only one male has been seen so far this year (see photos). Reasons for this decline have been mooted as loss of habitat, degradation of the understorey – particularly from grazing by the also introduced Chinese Muntjac – increased predation, disturbance (including by birders) and inbreeding within a very small gene pool.

By any interpretation this looks like an extinction curve, and with the species only present in Britain for about 125 years – at times artificially fed – it could be argued that it was never a true part of the British avifauna and, like Red-winged Laughing Thrush on the Isle of Man, Lady Amherst's Pheasant may never have been truly established. Golden Pheasant, too, seems to be suffering the depredations of degraded habitat and inbreeding,

and may also be on its way out.

That said, these secretive yet beautiful pheasants have traditionally been considered highly desirable by British birders, and the ever-increasing rarity of Lady Amherst's only adds to its enigmatic aura. If it proves that this male is indeed the last of its kind surviving on the Greensand Ridge, it represents the sole legacy of a population which has enchanted British birders and drawn them to this pocket of the Home Counties for a number of decades.

In 2005, the BOU 'demoted' Lady Amherst's Pheasant to Category C6 of the British list, a sub-category dedicated to 'formerly naturalised species' which are either extinct or no longer self-sustaining. This re-shuffle essentially renders any individuals not of the original, self-sustaining population uncountable and so the few remaining birds on the Greensand Ridge became even more desirable to birders lacking the species on their lists. If the 2015 male does represent the last of its kind, there can be little argument that it represents a 'Holy Grail' among introduced birds.

Once this final, presumably old-aged, individual perishes, it will bring a colourful era to an end. While the argument persists that Lady Amherst's Pheasant has never formed a natural part of Britain's birdlife, it would be hard not to feel some pang of sentimentality about the loss of such an exquisite and hard-to-see bird, whether from our countryside or our lists. ■



It may be introduced, but it's hard not to be astonished by this male in its breeding finery – the tail plumes can reach almost 1 m in length, while the black-edged white 'cape' feathers are also a distinguishing feature.

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Rarities: February 2015

Resident rarities in for the long haul



Josh Jones relates a month where the vast majority of interesting birds were long-stayers, though many proved exceedingly popular.

PAUL AND ANDREA KELLY (WWW.IRISHBIRDMAGES.COM)

A mixture of the exotic and the mundane could be seen at Lough Gill, Co Kerry, with an American Coot peeking out from in between two Mute Swans and a drake Lesser Scaup (third from right) among the Coot and Tufted Duck. Another drake Lesser Scaup was more showy at Cosmeston Lakes, Glamorgan, throughout (inset).

February's rarity headlines were dominated by the same lingering individuals seen in January, although many of the best species were present in twos across Britain and Ireland.

The young drake Harlequin Duck on the River Don in Aberdeen was present throughout and showed exceptionally well at times, utterly unconcerned by onlookers. Its plumage also improved as the month wore on, with areas once uniformly brown becoming increasingly punctuated by flashes of white, chestnut and blue-grey.

Another Harlequin Duck – this time a female – was discovered off Brora, Highland, on 17th (see page 10) but, unlike the Aberdeen bird, was far from confiding, being seen offshore on just three subsequent dates. This record is all the more impressive given the Hebridean bird seen just two winters ago – three Scottish records in three winters is a truly excellent return given the extreme rarity of the species in Britain.

Also significant was the apparent confirmation that there are (and presumably long have been) two Pacific Divers in Cornwall. With the Mount's Bay bird seen regularly between

Marazion and Penzance throughout February, the report of a bird off Pendower Beach on 1st was intriguing, and was confirmed via photographs on 18th, at the same time the other bird was being seen off Marazion. With the Pendower bird still there on 19th, the chances of a settled bird in Mount's Bay suddenly upping sticks and flying along

The long-staying and relatively accessible mainland Harlequin Duck in Aberdeen remained eminently viewable throughout, providing many visiting birders with their first views of the species.

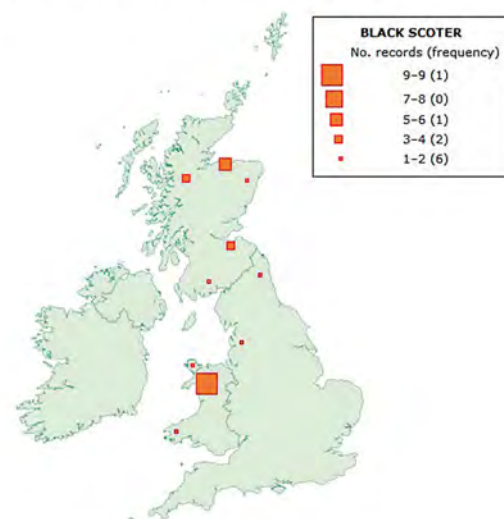
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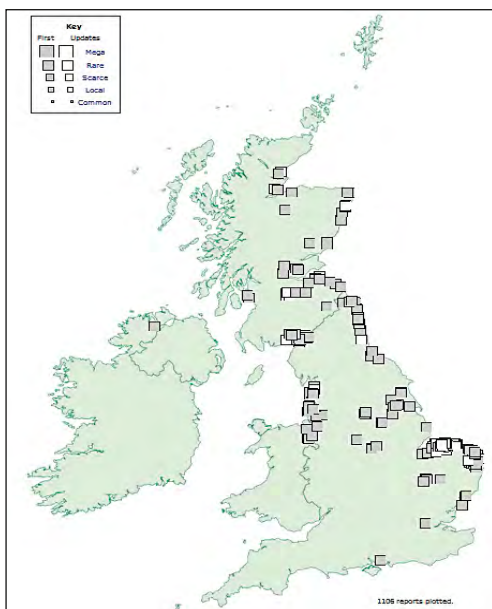
Distribution of accepted Black Scoter reports by county



Northumberland's Black Scoter (right hand bird, with Common Scoter) became more reliable during the month. The BirdGuides.com map of all the British records (right) shows that one in the county was probably on the cards, but North Wales has the lion's share of the sightings so far.

Below: a Ross's Goose stood out among the Pink-feet at Widdrington Moor Lake, Northumberland, on 17th.

Right: mapping all the British occurrences of Ross's Goose since 2000 on BirdGuides.com shows a clear correlation with the winter distribution of Pink-footed Goose, the widely suspected carrier species for this not yet officially accepted rarity.



some 80 miles of coastline to Gerrans Bay and back again seems highly improbable.

Ex-pat Yanks

Still in residence were the two American Coots, with one each at Lough Gill, Co Kerry, and Balranald, North Uist, throughout.

After being a little hit and miss in the week following its arrival in late January, the drake Black Scoter at Cheswick Sands, Northumberland, became more settled during February and was seen regularly during the month, visiting nearby Holy Island on the final day. In Co Kerry, the drake was last reported from Rossbeigh on 24th, apparently ending a six-week stay in the area.

Cheshire's first Laughing Gull since October 2001 was a fantastic find at New Brighton marine lake, Wirral, from 3rd (see last month's *Birdwatch*, pages 14-15). The bird, a first-winter, went on to show extremely well and unsurprisingly proved one of the most popular birds of February. In fact, this is the first easily twitchable Laughing Gull anywhere on British soil since 2007, when an immature spent the entirety of the year in Devon. The continued presence of the long-staying second-winter in Cork ensured that Laughing Gull was also represented by two individuals.

An adult Bonaparte's Gull at Llanelli WWT on 3rd was surprisingly a first for



JOE JOBLING



RICHARD SMITH

STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

Above: a real February highlight for locals and year-listers alike was this first-winter Laughing Gull at New Brighton, Cheshire, which performed well in the harbour there and proved both photogenic and reliable from 3rd.

Left: the New Brighton bird wasn't the only Laughing Gull in Britain and Ireland – there was also this showy and long-staying second-winter at Ballycotton, Co Cork.

Carmarthenshire of this annual British rarity. This is all the more impressive given that neighbouring Glamorgan has attracted multiple birds in recent years; the returning adult in Cardiff also reappeared right on cue on 1st. Also still present was the seemingly perennial adult at Dawlish Warren, Devon. The first-winter American Herring Gull was seen again at Kyles Paible, North Uist, on 2nd, while a possible was seen and photographed at Rufforth, North Yorks, on 11-12th. The mobile adult Forster's Tern continued to tour Galway Bay and was last noted at Doorus on 28th – this bird has now been reported 351 times on Bird News Extra!

The drake American Black Duck was still on Tresco, Scilly, to at least 19th but mostly proved elusive. Meanwhile, at the opposite end of the country, the Blue-winged Teal remained at The Shunan, Orkney, throughout February. A reasonable scattering of Lesser Scaup included two (a drake and a female) alongside the American Coot at Lough

Gill, Co Kerry, and the drake with a Portuguese nasal saddle still at Llangorse Lake, Powys. Further birds were in Cornwall, Glamorgan, Ayrshire and Co Cavan, the last being a newly discovered drake at Lough Parisee on 19th. In Cornwall, the young drake King Eider remained off Maenporth throughout February alongside its commoner cousins; the only other to be reported was the regular female off Ruddon's Point, Fife.

Small geese linger

It's been a fairly lean winter for rare geese, and this remained true in February. The Ross's Goose stayed put in Northumberland throughout the month, but was only sporadic in its appearances and was last seen at Stobswood on 24th. Two Richardson's Cackling Geese (of the subspecies *hutchinsii*) were seen on Islay, Argyll, on 18th, with a third bird still with the Barnacle Geese in the Lissadell area of Co Sligo. Meanwhile in Dumfries and Galloway, the Ridgway's Cackling

Goose (*minima*) continued to frequent Cults Loch until at least 21st.

A couple of Gyr Falcon reports in February included a white morph on the Inishkea Islands, Co Mayo, on 4th and a grey morph photographed at Lough Gill, Co Kerry, on 19th.

A new Lesser Yellowlegs was seen briefly near Skibbereen, Co Cork, on 4th, while the wintering birds also remained at Poulmasherry Bay, Co Clare, and Rogerstown Estuary, Co Dublin. The East Sussex individual proved elusive and was only noted on a handful of dates, the last being at Winchelsea on 21st.

Black-bellied Dippers are always attractions and so the discovery of a bird on Kelk Beck near Harpham, East Yorks, was welcome; it was the first in the county since one at Watton from February-March 2008. Though first reported on 13th, it had been present since at least 10th and showed well there into March. A second individual was located at Skaw, Unst, Shetland, on 24-25th and performed

extremely well.

Three Penduline Tits remained at Dart's Farm RSPB, Devon, throughout the month and made the occasional sortie to nearby Exminster Marshes. Towards the end of the month a divide seemed to be appearing in the ranks, with two spending much of their time together and the third bird much more intermittent in its appearances.

Something of a surprise was news of a singing male Two-barred Crossbill at Speech House Woodland, Glos, on 15th. This follows sightings of a single male at nearby Woorgreens Lake back in September 2014 and at least 17 in the area last winter; perhaps one or two have been hanging around all along? ■

• For full details of all February's sightings, go to www.birdguides.com. To receive free illustrated weekly sightings summaries and other news, sign up at bit.ly/BGWeeklyNews.

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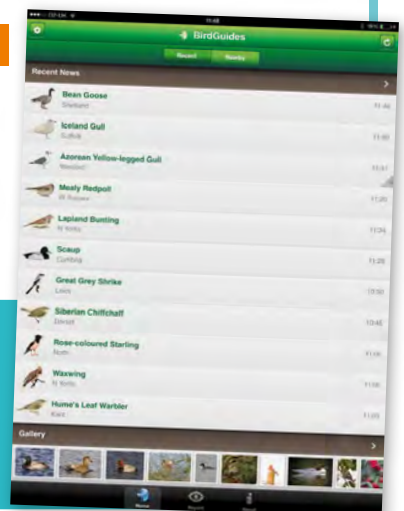
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Scarcities: February 2015

The migrants that came to stay

Wintering scarce passerines revealed themselves in some numbers around the country, writes **Josh Jones**, including some exceptional unseasonal migrants.



Often suggested as a 'secret' rare wintering species, Little Bunting's unobtrusive nature means that few are found if this is truly the case. However, this February three were discovered, including this peek-a-boo individual at Ashdown Forest, East Sussex.

MIKE GALTRY

Gunners Park, in Shoeburyness, Essex, has turned into a minor scarcity hot-spot in recent years, with Parrot Crossbill, Olive-backed Pipit and now European Serin on its list; this was one of two males there from 27 January.



JOHN STANTON

Right: seven overwintering Richard's Pipits in the country included two at Breydon Water, Norfolk, and this bird at Redcliffe Point, Weymouth, Dorset, last seen on 4th.

As is often the case in winter, there was an interesting selection of birds on offer during the month, including some unusual lingering migrants and good numbers of newly discovered birds.

Last month we touched on the selection of wintering migrants to be found across Britain and Ireland, and more were revealed

during February. The Ring Ouzel flock at Nant Ffrancon, Gwynedd, increased to five birds before records tailed off mid-month. Further reports included a showy male at Roxby, North Yorks, for much of the month, as well as records from Cornwall, West Sussex, Warwickshire, Nottinghamshire, Powys and Derbyshire to complete an exceptional spread of wintering individuals.

Lesser Whitethroats were seen in Clyde and Devon, while the Reed Warbler remained at Marston sewage works, Lincs, early on. A number of Garganey included lingering birds at Cley, Norfolk, Pennington Flash, Greater Manchester, and Rufford CP, Notts, and another reported from Co Antrim. Unfortunately, these were not supplemented by any early-returning summer migrants by the end of the month.

Wildfowl numbers were fairly respectable during February, with





JOHN MCINNIS

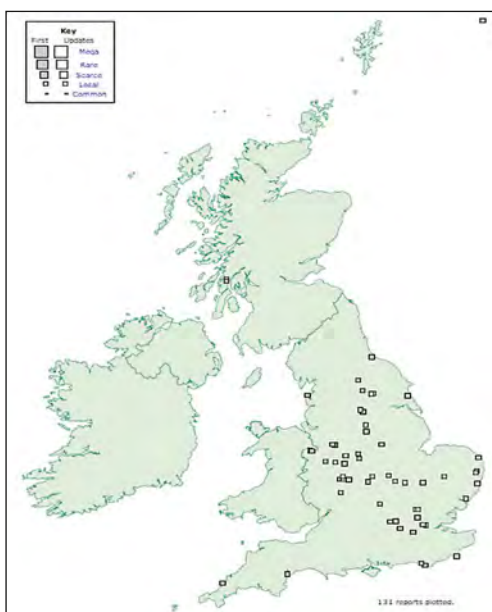
This adult Ring-billed Gull by the lake at Townhill CP, Fife, on 27th was a new discovery during the month; numbers of this recently very scarce species seem to have been on the increase this winter.



PAUL G BUTTERWORTH

A seal carcass proved very attractive to this third-winter Glaucous Gull at Skerry Harbour, Sutherland, on 1st. In contrast to Ring-billed, numbers of 'white-wingers' were down this winter.

A map from BirdGuides.com of Caspian Gull reports this February shows the species' almost total restriction to England, particularly the South-East and Midlands; the Shropshire bird (below) is one of the more westerly records.



American Wigeon again prospering. As many as 15 birds included two females still on the Gannel Estuary, Cornwall, throughout, and a third in the county at Kingsmill Lake. Rather impressively, the drake in Aberdeenshire was trapped and ringed during a routine wildfowl ringing session at the Ythan Estuary on 7th, allowing for some fantastic in-the-hand images to be taken. Further new birds were found at Burton Mere, Cheshire, on 5th, Holme Pierrepont, Notts, from 7th, Melby, Mainland, Shetland, on 8th and near Fairlie, Ayrshire, from 17th. Green-winged Teal were noticeably more numerous, with at least 15 new birds found across Britain and Ireland, in addition to familiar long-stayers such as those in Co Durham and Dumfries and Galloway.

Fresh ducks arrive

New Ring-necked Duck were thin on the ground, although a drake toured Somerset: first seen at Ashford Res on 6th, it later relocated to Clatworthy Res from 21st. Other new birds were on Orkney and in Co Mayo. Several long-stayers included those in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire, and two in Dumfries and Galloway; two birds also remained at Lough Leane, Co Kerry, after four were there in January. The female Ferruginous Duck continued at Slimbridge, Glos, throughout, though in Hampshire the Blashford Lakes drake was last seen on 8th.

One of the highlights of the month was a delightfully showy Surf Scoter close in off Filey Brigg, North Yorks, from 14th.



KRIS WEBB

The first-winter Caspian Gull at Trench Pool, Shropshire, from 1-18 February was a great county bird, and enabled virtually every local who wanted to catch up with it enough time to do so.



JAMES HANLON

This long-staying Kumlien's Gull at Littlehampton, West Sussex, proved accommodating to most during its stay from January, but was last seen on 8th.

Unfortunately its confiding behaviour was all too short lived, and it became much more distant when it relocated to nearby Scarborough from 20th. For those who saw it off Filey, the views will be hard to top – even some who saw the famous Farmoor Res, Oxon, bird proclaimed this one to be better. Elsewhere, at least four remained off the Conwy coastline and further drakes were in Fife, Lothian, the Suffolk/Essex border and Hampshire, with the last showing well in Stokes Bay from 25th. In Ireland, birds were in Counties Clare and Wexford.

Rough-legged Buzzards numbered around 20 nationwide, with two still at Burnham Overy and Holkham, Norfolk, and at Low Moor, South Yorks, and Quarrington Hill, Co Durham. The extremely showy bird also continued to entertain at Grindale, East Yorks.

An impressive report concerning a first-winter Caspian Gull seen from a vessel in Shetland waters some way to the east of Whalsay on 6th represents a first record for the islands, and is presumably the most northerly ever recorded in Britain – though one reached south-east Iceland last winter. A fantastic find indeed.

Recent years have been somewhat poor for Ring-billed Gull in Britain, but this winter has proved a pleasant exception; several new birds were reported around the

country, including an extremely popular and confiding adult at Townhill Loch, Fife, from 8th and an adult at Marazion, Cornwall, which was one of three recorded in the county in February. A first-winter at Beacon Ponds, East Yorks, briefly on 21st was a fine record for the county. Numbers in Ireland were more typical, although five at Nimmo's Pier, Co Galway, on 19th was a good count by recent standards.

Few 'white-wingers'

White-winged gull numbers continued to struggle, although there was a welcome pulse of northbound Iceland Gulls right at the end of the month which included 15 on South Uist and 16 in Stornoway Harbour, Lewis, both Outer Hebrides, on 26th. Kumlien's Gulls included at least three in the Rufforth area, North Yorks, though the second-winter at Littlehampton, West Sussex, only lingered to 8th.

The underwhelming winter for Waxwings was perhaps typified by the lonely vigil of a young female in Mildenhall, Suffolk, from 6th, which actually proved to be one of East Anglia's most-twitched birds throughout February. A bird adjacent to Orrell Water Park, Greater Manchester, was also confiding and proved to be a returning individual, ringed in the very same garden on 23 February 2013. Elsewhere, very few flocks were encountered: 10 were at Kesgrave, Suffolk, to 9th and



Few Waxwing flocks made double figures this winter; this bird was one of up to two which frequented Morpeth, Northumberland, from 3rd.

JOHN MALLOY



RON MARSHALL

Dippers of the Continental subspecies group – known as 'Black-bellied Dipper' – always prove popular in winter, as they tend to stake out a territory and stick to it. This bird was at Harpham, East Yorks, from 10th.

the highest count was of 26 in Westhill, Aberdeens, on 5th.

In contrast, the prosperous start to 2015 for Richard's Pipit records continued, with new birds at Coverack, Cornwall, on 3rd and Parton, Cumbria, on 16th; additionally, the long-stayer at Breydon Water, Norfolk, was joined by a second from 15th. Others remained in Dorset, Kent and North Yorkshire.

Devon and Cornwall held the monopoly on the month's Yellow-browed Warblers, with new birds found at Carminow and St Levan, both Cornwall, and Paignton and Slapton Ley, Devon. The two male European Serins continued to frequent Gunners Park, Essex, throughout February and, towards the end of the month, both could be heard singing – injecting a taste of the Mediterranean to this corner of the county. The Rose-coloured Starling was last seen in Prudhoe,

Northumberland, on 9th.

Great Grey Shrikes remained widespread, with at least 25 recorded; several individuals performed well for photographers, including those at Chilham, Kent, Beeley Moor, Derbys, and Crabtree Hill, Glos.

Three Little Buntings were found during the month, with one in particular – at Forest Farm near Cardiff, Glamorgan – showing stunningly well from 5th. Another was photographed at Old Lodge in Ashdown Forest, East Sussex, on 5th, but news was only made public on 9th, when the bird was identified. It proved an altogether more elusive character and was only seen sporadically throughout the month. A third was then found in a cauliflower field near Marazion, Cornwall, on 10th and it, too, lingered until the end of the month. ■

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Western Palearctic: February 2015

A flock of gold

While many long-staying regional rarities dug in for the winter, **Josh Jones** reports that there was also the biggest-ever flock of a much-desired African species.



The largest and most northerly flock of Sudan Golden Sparrows ever recorded in the region was at Bir Anzarane, Morocco, on 6th, associating with the more expected Desert Sparrows. Inset: Sudan Golden Sparrow certainly makes our more familiar *Passer* species look dowdy by comparison, and the species is much sought after by Western Palearctic listers.



Above: a long-staying Middle Spotted Woodpecker on Gotland, Sweden, remained present since late December, and was the first to be seen in the country for 20 years.

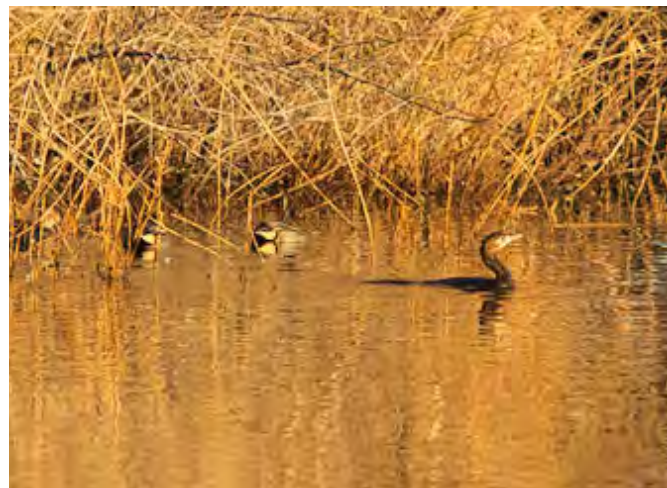
Right: an exceptional occurrence from the east was this Pygmy Cormorant at Aiguamolls de l'Empordà, Catalonia, Spain, which also lingered from December, and was a national first.

The highlight of the month was undoubtedly the exciting discovery of a large flock of Sudan Golden Sparrows at Bir Anzarane, Morocco. Following a single bird at the end of January, 28 were recorded on 2 February with this rising to 31 by 6th – easily the highest number ever counted in Western Sahara, and also the most northerly records to date. A full article on these birds can be found at bit.ly/goldensparrows. Also in Western Sahara, belated news concerned a Kelp Gull photographed there in late January.

News from Israel concerned the continued presence of the Lesser Flamingo at KM20 salt pans, north of Eilat, early in the

month. Three Velvet Scoters off Ashdod on 17th represent just the eighth Israeli record. Another wintering Lesser Flamingo remained in Sulaibhikhat Bay, Kuwait, until at least 7th and the nation's second-ever Red-breasted Merganser – a fine drake – was at Al-Jahra Pools on 11th. A Striated Heron at Al Khiran on 19th was a national fourth.

Visits to the Cape Verde Islands revealed the continued presence of both Intermediate



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ÓMAR RUNÓLFSSON



ARNOUD B VAN DEN BERG

Top left: Glaucous Gull was a rare sight as far south as Oued Ksob, Morocco, on 15th.

Top right: the Glaucous-winged Gull (front) remained in Iceland, mixing with Iceland (middle) and Glaucous Gulls (back).

Far left: Rinkaby, Sweden, hosted this Spotted Sandpiper.

Left: The Netherlands' second Dark-eyed Junco also lingered.



Egret and Black Heron on Santiago, and at least one Magnificent Frigatebird on Boa Vista during February. In the Azores, the Short-billed Dowitcher notched up yet another month on Terceira and a female Snowy Owl was taken into care on Flores on 16th – it's not clear whether this is the bird seen on both Flores and Corvo in 2014, but it seems likely.

Happily for Spanish listers, the Brown Shrike seen by just a single observer back in early January was relocated along the Ebro river in Deltebre on 9th (see pages 8-9), and although elusive remained there to the month's end, generating one of the largest-ever Spanish twitches. The

Pygmy Cormorant at Aiguamolls de l'Empordà, Catalonia, lingered all month, as did the Thayer's Gull at San Cibrao, Galicia – the latter topping an excellent month for gulls in north-west Spain with American Herring Gull and at least two Bonaparte's Gulls also recorded. In Italy the Grey-headed Gull was seen again at Bisceglie on 8th and 27th, while the Great Black-headed Gull was still in Taranto on 25th.

The Netherlands' second Dark-eyed Junco was an excellent find in Beijum, Groningen, on 2nd. It lingered throughout the month, often showing well. Also performing well at times were the Oriental Turtle Dove in Vlaardingen and the Spotted

Sandpiper at Medemblik, while the ever-present Long-legged Buzzard also hung around all month. In neighbouring Belgium, the Wallcreeper was still in Dinant until 26th at least.

A drake Barrow's Goldeneye at Preetz, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, from 20th onwards is presumably the bird also seen there in 2010 (but not since). It has been accepted only in Category D, but with no obvious signs of captivity an upgrade to Category A is perhaps deserved.

In Iceland the Glaucous-winged Gull continued to be seen around Reykjavík harbour throughout February; the Hooded Merganser was still at nearby Hrauntúnstjörn and the White-winged Scoter

remained off Keflavík.

A Snowy Owl was seen on the Halfdan A oil platform in the Danish North Sea on 19th, while in Sweden, the wintering American Black Duck and Spotted Sandpiper were still at Båstad and Rinkaby respectively. The Middle Spotted Woodpecker also remained on Gotland.

A Calandra Lark was at Masku, Finland, from 8th onwards and represents the 12th national record. Also in the country, the Black-throated Accentor remained on Hailuoto and the Azure Tit was still at Kolari. ■

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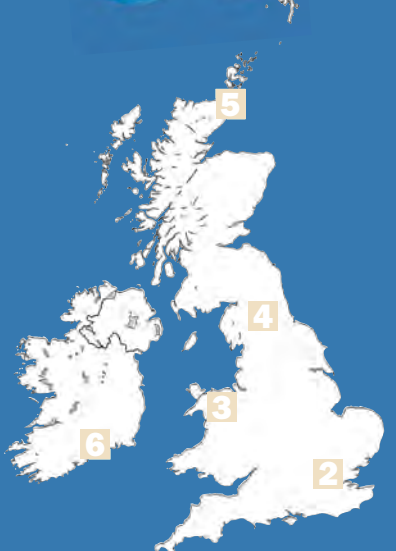
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Where
to watch
birds

- 1** The Rock of Gibraltar. Pages 25-27
- 2** Bowers Marsh, Essex. Page 28
- 3** Snowdonia, Conwy. Page 29
- 4** Allen Banks, Cow Green and Moor House NNR, North Pennines. Page 30
- 5** Dunnet Head, Caithness. Page 31
- 6** Brownstone Head, Helvick Head and Cunnigar, Co Waterford. Page 32



MORE APRIL SITES

- Deeside, Aberdeenshire: bit.ly/bw250Deeside
- Estonia and Lithuania: bit.ly/bw226Estonia
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- North Pennines, Co Durham, Northumberland and Cumbria: bit.ly/bw214NorthPennines
- Preston to Blackpool, Lancashire: bit.ly/bw238PrestonBlackpool
- Scilly: bit.ly/bw238Scilly
- Skomer and Marloes, Pembrokeshire: bit.ly/bw238SkomerandMarloes



FINLAYSON NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY (WWW.FINLAYSON-NATURE.COM)

1 SITE OF THE MONTH

THE ROCK OF GIBRALTAR

Just a short plane ride away, this famous hot-spot is one of the best places in Europe to watch numbers of spring migrants streaming north, says **Stewart Finlayson**.

In the right conditions, falls on the Rock can be spectacular, and may include a variety of migrants such as Western Subalpine Warbler.



Some locations are synonymous with bird migration, and the Rock of Gibraltar is one of those places. You can catch a flight from London, Birmingham or Manchester and be watching migration just three hours later – one feature of Gibraltar is its small size, so you can get from the airport to a watchpoint by car in 10 minutes.

English is the main language, the currency is sterling and the climate is Mediterranean, making this an irresistible destination to go and see spectacular migration and some special

birds. There is some movement to be seen here for 10 months of the year, but spring, and especially April, is when you can see the greatest variety.

Stars of the show

Raptors are the highlight and you need to go towards the south of the peninsula for the best views. Africa is ever present, except during misty easterlies, just across the sea and you can easily scan the coast opposite and pick up flocks of birds as they leave for Europe.

You don't just watch raptors at

USEFUL CONTACTS

Travel information and timetables

- **Traveline:** 0871 200 2233 or www.traveline.info.
- **Traveline Scotland:** 0871 200 2233 or www.travelinescotland.com.
- **Traveline Cymru:** 0871 200 2233 or www.traveline-cymru.info

- **Stagecoach Bus:** www.stagecoachbus.com.
- **Arriva Bus:** 0844 800 4411 or www.arrivabus.co.uk.
- **National Rail:** 0845 748 4950 or www.nationalrail.com.

National bird news
BirdGuides.com: for all bird news

and to report your own sightings, call 0333 577 2473, email sightings@birdguides.com or visit www.birdguides.com.

Mapping

Access fully interactive and annotated Google maps for all these itineraries at bit.ly/BWMaps.

Further information

- **County bird recorders:** www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdtrack/bird-recording/county-bird-recorders.
- **Birdwatch Bookshop:** for discounted birding books see www.birdwatch.co.uk/store.

A huge range of birds of prey pass over Gibraltar, including Short-toed Eagle.

Gibraltar, here you experience the struggle as birds labour to keep above the waves, come down exhausted or fight off aggressive **Yellow-legged Gulls** or **Peregrine Falcons** that breed on the sea-cliffs. Birds pass all day, from early morning to dusk. **Black Kite**, **Short-toed** and **Booted Eagles**, **Sparrowhawk**, **Montagu's** and **Marsh Harriers**, **Kestrel** and **Lesser Kestrel** are regulars, along with flocks of **White** and **Black Storks**. Early in April there is still passage of **Egyptian Vulture**, **Hen Harrier** and **Osprey**.

As the month proceeds there is a build-up in the numbers of **Honey Buzzards** and a spectacular second wave of immature birds of several species. Most impressive among these are the flocks of **Griffon Vultures** and there is a chance of **Rüppell's**, an African speciality that has become a regular feature in recent years. One exciting aspect of migration is that almost anything can turn up: **Black Vulture**, **Spanish Imperial** and **Lesser Spotted Eagles**, **Black-**

winged Kite, **Long-legged Buzzard**, **Pallid Harrier**, **Eleonora's Falcon** and **Lanner** are among those that can be picked up at this time. April is also a great time to see the flocks of **European Bee-eaters** and hirundines, including **Red-rumped Swallow**, which come across during the daylight hours.

Best sites

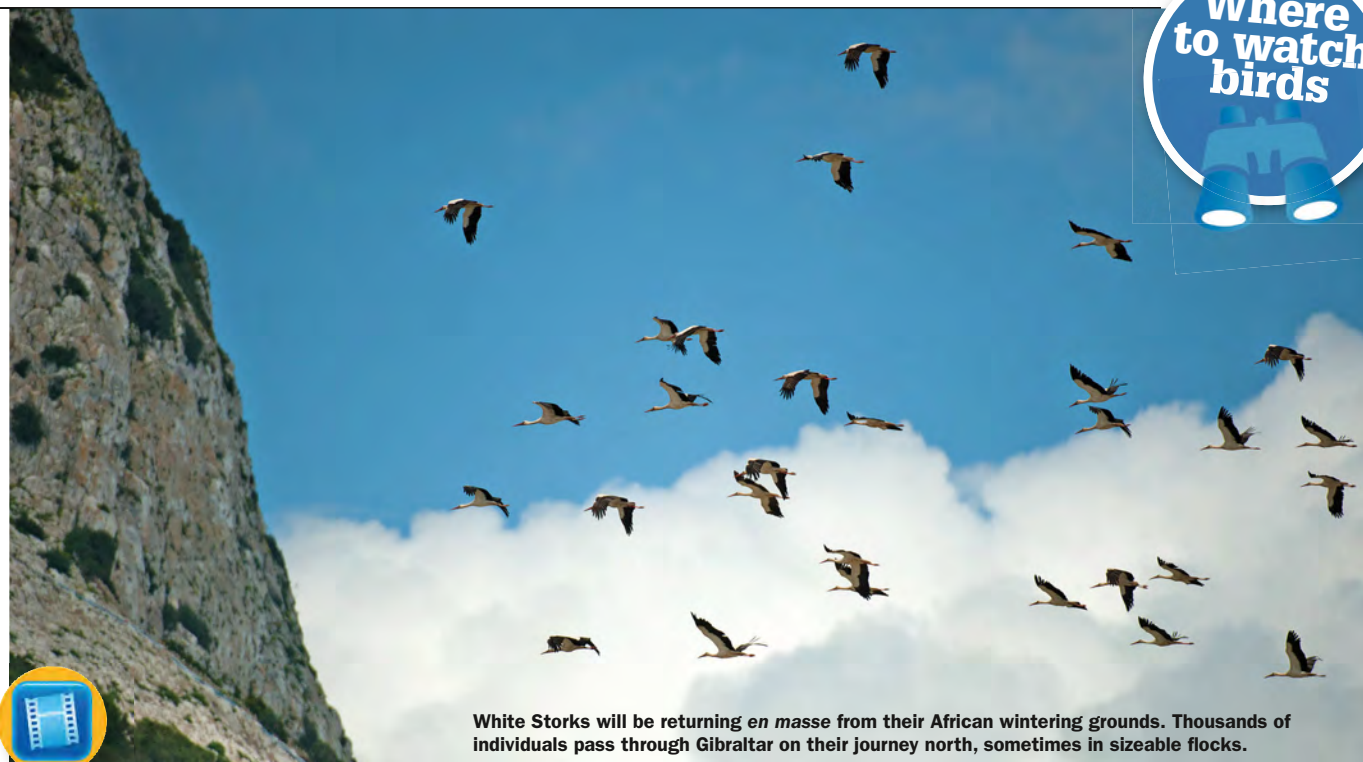
An excellent area for watching raptors is around Europa Point **1**, Gibraltar's southernmost tip and easily accessible

by road with a good bus connection to the city centre. Here you can see raptors close-up. Another good site is Jews' Gate Cemetery **2** where the Gibraltar Ornithological and Natural History Society (GONHS) has an observation point. You can get there by car, taxi or cable car, but walking is not difficult either. Jews' Gate marks the entrance to the Gibraltar NR and entry charges apply.

If the wind turns calm or to the east, raptors do not pass over the rock. If

The Yellow-legged Gulls that breed on the sea-cliffs will attack exhausted incoming raptors such as Griffon Vulture.





White Storks will be returning *en masse* from their African wintering grounds. Thousands of individuals pass through Gibraltar on their journey north, sometimes in sizeable flocks.

you haven't had enough of these birds, then hiring a car and crossing the border into Spain (best early in the morning to avoid queues) gives you the option to head towards Tarifa. Take the CA-34 to San Roque and then head west along the A-7, by-passing Algeciras. Between this city and Tarifa there are many options for observing raptor migration and they vary depending on the wind. Just pick up the main flow as you go and stop wherever possible close to this. Once out of Gibraltar the drive to Tarifa is under an hour.

Falling down

If you choose to stay on Gibraltar, this is the time to seek out passerines and other landbirds. Very often the easterlies bring a cloud that hangs over the rock

and this causes falls of migrants. If it comes with light rain, the falls can be very spectacular. One of the best places is the Gibraltar NR **3** on the Upper Rock, while Gibraltar's eastern side **4**, the cemetery at North Front **5** and the cliffs and scrub around Europa Point are also excellent.

One option is to walk or drive right round the rock and check patches of natural vegetation and gardens. You can have lots of fun seeing what lies in the next patch and it often changes from one day to the next. The Gibraltar Botanic Gardens **6**, just south of the city centre, are also an excellent location to look out for migrants.

The range of species defies this short account, but regulars include **Woodchat Shrike**, **Melodious**, **Western Bonelli's**

and **Western Subalpine Warblers**, and **Black-eared Wheatears**, to name a few. You will also become familiar with some of the local resident species, especially **Blue Rock Thrush**, **Sardinian Warbler** and **Barbary Partridge** – and, of course, the only population of wild monkeys in Europe, Gibraltar's famous Barbary Macaques.

Whatever the wind, an evening seawatch from Europa Point is a must. Plenty of seabirds move into or out of the Mediterranean. They include **Puffin**, **Northern Gannet**, **Scopoli's** and **Balearic Shearwaters**, skuas and the elegant **Audouin's Gull**.

Gibraltar migration is unpredictably exciting; you just don't know what will show up next. The beauty is that you can do it all within walking distance. ■



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



• **The Birds of the Iberian Peninsula** by Eduardo de Juana and Ernest Garcia (Bloomsbury, £60) – order from £54 on page 77.

• **Birds of the Strait of Gibraltar** by Clive Finlayson (Poyser Monographs, £50) – order from £40.99 on page 77.

Sites and access

Several companies fly to Gibraltar from British airports, including British Airways (www.britishairways.com), EasyJet (www.easyjet.com) and Monarch (www.monarch.co.uk). Cars can be hired at the airport. Jews' Gate is within the Gibraltar NR, for which there is an entry charge: £0.50 for walkers, or £2 for cars plus £10 per person inside the vehicle. All other sites are free to access. There is free parking at Europa Point and the botanic gardens. The Gibraltar Bus Company offers adult day passes for £2.25 and the routes cover most of Gibraltar (call 00 350 200 47622 or visit www.gibraltarbuscompany.gi).

Maps

- Gibraltar travel reference map (ITMB Publishing; www.itmb.ca).
- Gibraltar Geo Portal (www.geoportal.gov.gi).

Web resources

- www.visitgibraltar.gi for the official Gibraltar Tourist Board.
- www.gonhs.org for the Gibraltar Ornithological and Natural History Society.
- www.gibraltargardens.gi for more information on the Gibraltar Botanic Gardens.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to the fully annotated Google maps.

2

BOWERS MARSH RSPB

By Steven Roach

Where and why

Bowers Marsh RSPB is situated on the north side of the Thames Estuary, to the south of Basildon. The site is the largest of five public reserves that make up the RSPB south Essex reserves. It has various habitats including extensive wetlands, a large 10-ha intertidal lagoon, a 20-ha brackish lagoon with three large islands, a reedbed and arable areas with conservation cover crops, some of which have attracted European Turtle Dove.

Route planner

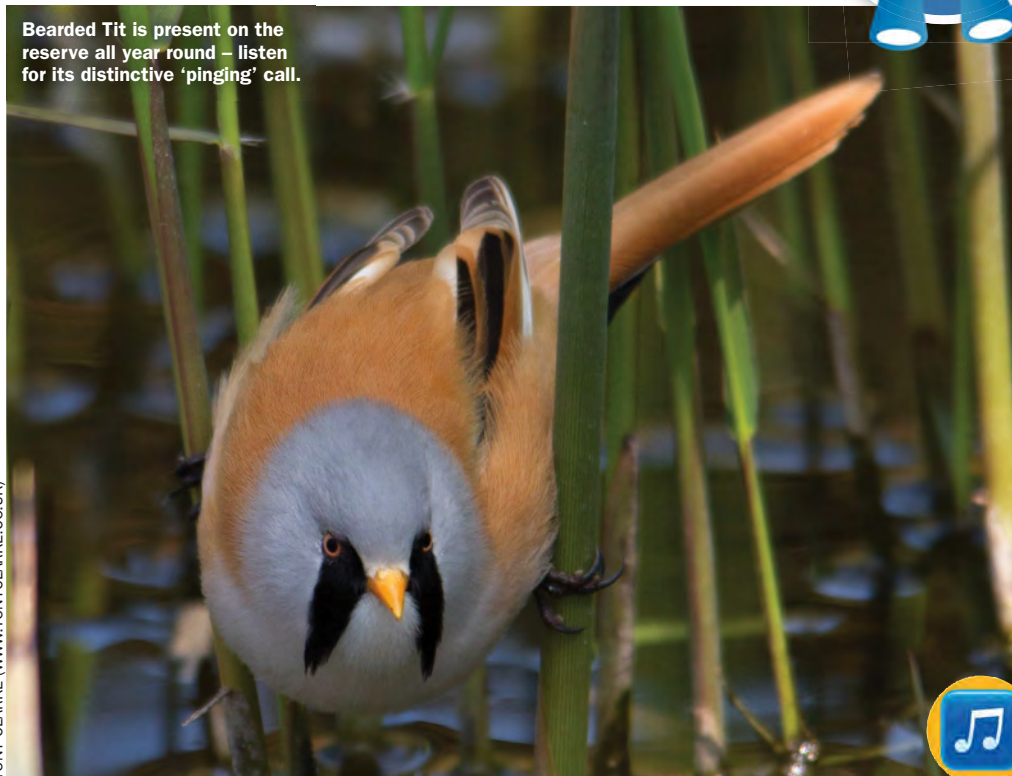
Access to the site is from the B1462 through Pitsea and Bowers Gifford. From the M25 take the A13 towards Basildon and Southend. Leave the A13 at the Pitsea exit and follow the signs towards Bowers Gifford. Bowers Marsh RSPB is signposted from the second mini-roundabout on the B1462. Please note: it is advisable to park at the church at the bottom of the hill and walk down to the reserve, unless you are travelling in a 4x4 vehicle, as the road from the church to the reserve car park is currently in poor condition. The RSPB is working to get this road improved as soon as possible.

Take the path leaving the car park eastwards ①, checking the blackthorn and hawthorn for singing **Corn Buntings**. From here, head up the hill following the line of Elm trees ② and listen out for the distinctive song of **Common Chiffchaff**. **Hobby** breeds in the area and may be seen hunting over the site.

At the highest point, turn right down the hill, then at the

Bearded Tit is present on the reserve all year round – listen for its distinctive ‘pinging’ call.

TONY CLARKE (WWW.TONYCLARKE.CO.UK)



bottom of the hill bear right again and walk towards the viewing point looking over the brackish lagoon. As you head towards the viewpoint ③, you should hear **Cetti's, Reed and Sedge Warblers**. On the lagoon ④ you can often view **Avocet** and **Common Redshank**, as well as the occasional **Garganey** (along with lingering winter wildfowl), **Yellow-legged and Mediterranean Gulls, Green and Wood Sandpipers, Spotted Redshank, Jack Snipe, Ruff and Black-tailed Godwit**. **Kingfisher** breeds and can be seen with patience, while

Little Egret and **Common Tern**, hirundines and **Common Swift** are usually present. Recent springs have also produced exciting species such as Glossy Ibis, Spoonbill, Red-necked Phalarope, Iceland and Little Gulls and White-spotted Bluethroat, so keep your eyes peeled.

From the viewpoint, head back along the path and turn right, heading south and then west, following the path around the site ⑤. Keep an eye out for returning **Northern Wheatear** and **Whinchat** along the many fence lines, while **Yellow Wagtail**

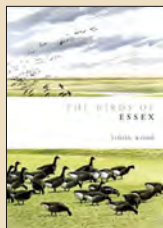
could also be passing through. The site is well known for good views of **Marsh Harrier**. As you approach the reedbed ⑥, look for both **Common** and **Lesser Whitethroats**, while the unique ‘pinging’ sound of **Bearded Tit** can be heard all year round.

Once you reach the hedgerows on either side of the path ⑦, continue until you reach the entrance gate to the reserve, while listening out for **Common Cuckoo** and keeping an eye open for **Yellowhammer**. Once at the gate, turn right back towards the car park or left back to the church. ■



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



The Birds of Essex by Simon Wood (Christopher Helm, £34.99 – buy from £34.99 on page 77.

> Sites and access

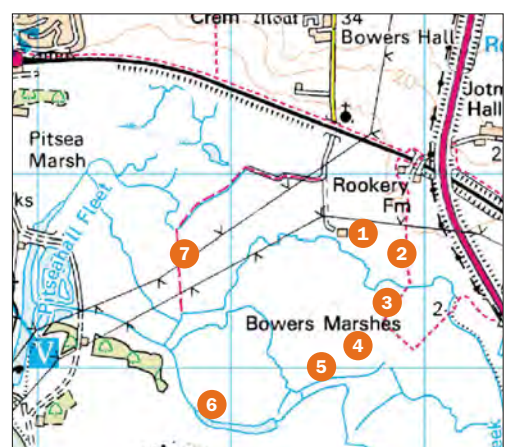
The reserve is open at all times, with the car park open 9 am to 5 pm year round, except Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year's Day. Entry and parking are free. The nearest train stations are at Pitsea and Benfleet. First Group Essex runs a regular bus service, the 22 Basildon and Canvey route (call 0345 602 0121 or visit www.firstgroup.com/ukbus/essex). The reserve is wheelchair accessible.

> Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 175 and Landranger 178.

> Web resources

- www.rspb.org.uk/bowersmarsh for Bowers Marsh RSPB.
- www.southendrspb.co.uk for local wildlife and sightings information.
- www.ebws.org.uk for the Essex Birdwatching Society, with photos, sightings and more.
- Follow on Twitter: @RSPBESSEX.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps



3

NORTH PENNINES

By Martin Kitching

Where and why

With Red and Black Grouse, Ring Ouzel, riparian species and an astonishing density of breeding waders, the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is arguably at its best in late April and early May. The area has a stunning landscape of open heather moors and peat bogs, attractive dales and hay meadows, tumbling upland rivers and ancient woodlands.

Route planner

Allen Banks should be your first port of call. This National Trust property is part of the largest area of ancient woodland in the North Pennines.

Starting from the pay-and-display car park (NY 797651) ¹, follow the path by the River Allen for about half a mile, as far as the obvious path that ascends the slope to your right.

Typical riparian birds such as **Common Sandpiper**, **Grey Wagtail**, **Dipper** and **Kingfisher** are easily found along this initial stretch, as are **Nuthatch** and **Treecreeper**. Listen carefully for the songs of **Pied Flycatcher**, **Common Redstart** and **Wood Warbler**.

The return trail along the top of the valley to the car park brings further opportunities to find the woodland specialities, and the possibility of Red Squirrel, sadly now declining even in its northern England strongholds.

Turn left out of the car park and then right at the A69. At the eastern end of the Haydon Bridge bypass, take the A686, signposted Alston. If you didn't

An early morning start is often required to catch up with **Black Grouse**. The species can be seen in the North Pennines, but do take care not to disturb lekking birds.

OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)



find a Wood Warbler at Allen Banks then the roadside trees as you pass Langley Castle ² offer another opportunity; park carefully by the monument and listen for the shivering, trilling song. As you head towards Alston look out for safe parking spots and scan for raptors, grouse, waders, **Northern Wheatear** and **Ring Ouzel**.

From Alston take the B6277, signposted Middleton in Teesdale. Appreciate the wilderness of the North Pennines

as the road winds across to Langdon Beck and, just before the village, take the road to the left, signposted St John's Chapel, and park carefully on the left after a few hundred metres ³.

The fields in the dip to your right are an excellent spot for **Black Grouse** and you should find Northern Wheatears close by (as you will along almost every roadside in the area). Please view any Black Grouse from your car in order to avoid any unnecessary disturbance. Although early

morning visits are recommended for lek sites, when the mood takes them, it takes them, regardless of time of day!

A little way along the road is a suitable turning area, so head back to the main road, turn left to Langdon Beck and then right, signposted Cow Green Reservoir. Created in 1967 to supply the water demand of the chemical industry on Teesside, the reservoir was a controversial project as a number of invertebrate and plant species were lost to the area when it was submerged.

Follow the track marked 'private road' where the road forks and continue along to the main car park (NY 810309) ⁴. From here, you can see Cross Fell (the highest point of the Pennines), Great and Little Dun Fells, Meldon Hill and Mickle Fell, among others.

There are several well-signposted paths around the area which you can explore, with **European Golden Plover**, **Northern Lapwing**, **Dunlin**, **Northern Wheatear**, **Common Snipe**

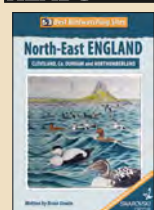
and **Red Grouse** all likely to be breeding on the moorland close to the tracks. Be sure to visit the stunning gorge of Cauldron Snout (NY 814286) ⁵, which offers an excellent chance of **Ring Ouzel**. Keep an eye out also for **Osprey** while you're in Teesdale.

The North Pennines AONB is criss-crossed by lots of interesting roads to explore if you have time; for example, the road from Allenheads to Rookhope is excellent for Ring Ouzel, Northern Wheatear and breeding waders. ■

i

VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



Best Birdwatching Sites: North-East England by Brian Unwin (Buckingham Press, £17.95) – order from £15.95 on page 77.

> Sites and access

There is free public access to all sites, though car parking charges may apply. Bardon Mill railway station is 1.5 miles away. Arriva Bus and Stagecoach Bus run local services. The 385 stops on the A69, half a mile from Allenbanks, while a limited service runs from Middleton-in-Teesdale to Langdon Beck, stopping at Cow Green on request. Allenbanks has some level ground; however, due to the unimproved nature of site, the land is primarily uneven and steep in places. The Cow Green nature trail is wide enough for wheelchair access.

> Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorers OL31 and OL43.

> Web resources

- www.ntbc.org.uk and www.durhambirdclub.org for local bird news and sightings.
- www.northpennines.org.uk for information about the AONB.
- Follow on Twitter: @NorthPennaONB.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps



4

SNOWDONIA

By Alan Davies

Where and why

Snowdonia NP covers a huge area of north-west Wales. Mostly mountainous, the park also has excellent woodlands, fast-flowing streams and lakes, providing homes to some special birds. April is a great time to search them out as migrant birds will be arriving back at their breeding sites and resident species will be easier to see as they too gear up for the mating season.

Route planner

Begin your day early – bird activity will be at its peak with fewer people about. Snowdonia is particularly popular with walkers at weekends, so a mid-week visit is ideal.

This route starts at Gwydir Castle, west of Llanrwst in the Conwy Valley 1. From the A55 take Junction 19 for the A470 south, signed Betws-y-Coed. Continue for 11 miles to Llanrwst. At the south end of the town turn right off the A470, over the bridge, onto the B5106, continue for half a mile and turn left, then immediately right onto the minor road through Gwydir Forest.

Start in Gwydir Forest above Llanrwst, taking the minor road off the B5106 by Gwydir Castle just west of Llanrwst. The road climbs up through the forest; continue for four miles, stopping frequently to listen for bird song and jump out to find **Wood Warbler** – particularly in the first half a mile – and other woodland birds.

After a very sharp right-hand bend on a steep hill, you will reach some old mine workings

Gwydir Forest should produce a beautifully bright yellow-and-green Wood Warbler.



STEVE KNELL

on the right. Stop to check the open area below the road for **Tree Pipit**, **Common Crossbill** and **Siskin**. Continue on and the road levels out, with more mine workings on the left. This is an excellent site for **Common Redstart**, which is often found on the fence wires below the road.

After half a mile you will reach a car park and viewpoint on the left. Scan the vista for raptors – on a fine morning **Common Buzzard** and **Sparrowhawk** can be seen and with lots of luck **Goshawk** is possible.

Continue along this very narrow lane to reach the A5. Park at the junction on the left, and enjoy a cuppa at the Ugly House Café (SH 767577) 2. The woods behind

the café have excellent birding, with **Pied Flycatcher** and **Wood Warbler**, plus **Jay**, **Nuthatch** and **Great Spotted Woodpecker**. The River Llugwy below the café has a footpath beside it, which can be accessed from the left side of the stone bridge over the A5; look for **Dipper** and **Grey Wagtail** here.

Continue north on the A5 for 7.7 miles to the Ogwen Valley. Park at the far end of Llyn Ogwen (SH 649604) 3, having checked the water for **Goosander**. Take the footpath to Cwm Idwal (SH 645595) 4, signposted from the car park.

The scree slopes and boulder fields hold **Ring Ouzels**, but these can be tricky to find. Listen for the song of the males. This is

quite a steep rocky path which is only suitable for those who are reasonably fit and properly prepared to venture into the mountains.

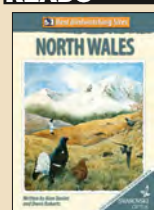
Next continue past the car park onto a narrow lane through a larch plantation (SH 648603). This leads you into the scenic Nant Ffrancon valley where it is possible to see **Ring Ouzel** from the road: check particularly the scree slopes on the left, before you reach the cattle grid (SH 642607).

While not common, **Chough** is possible in the valley. **Peregrine Falcon** could be encountered anywhere along this route. The road eventually rejoins the A5 one mile south of Bethesda. ■



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



Best Birdwatching Sites: North Wales by Alan Davies and Owen Roberts (Buckingham Press, £17.95) – order from £15.95 on page 77.

Sites and access

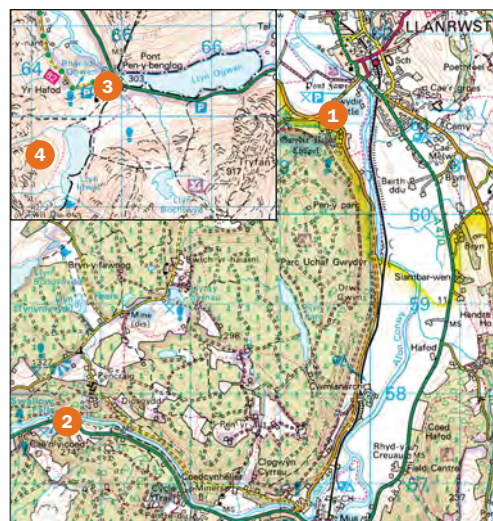
All areas have public access, with no entrance fees or permits required. A parking fee is payable at the west end of Llyn Ogwen, all other areas have free roadside parking. This would be a very difficult route to follow on public transport as the minor roads do not have a bus service. However, Arriva Bus runs services between Llanrwst and Bethesda, via Betws-y-Coed, so the woods and river by the Ugly House Café, Llyn Ogwen and Cwm Idwal are accessible. Much of the birding can be done from the car or roadside so ideal for those who are less mobile, but Cwm Idwal is not possible for those less able.

Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer OL17 and Landranger 115.

Web resources

- www.birdwatchingtrips.co.uk for birding in north Wales.
- www.webirdnorthwales.blogspot.co.uk for recent sightings.
- www.eryri-npa.gov.uk for information on Snowdonia NP.
- Follow on Twitter: @visitsnowdonia.



ORDNANCE SURVEY MAPPING © CROWN COPYRIGHT: AM45/10

See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps

5 DUNNET HEAD

By Dave Jones

Where and why

Dunnet Head is the most northerly point on the British mainland, and a beautiful area to do some birding. If you follow a route from Castlehill on the south shore of Dunnet Bay it is possible to visit a variety of habitats from the bay's sandy beaches, fresh water at St John's, and a wide expanse of heather moorland before finally reaching the sea-cliffs of the RSPB reserve at Dunnet Head.

Route planner

Take the A836 from Thurso. From the car park (ND 200681) **1** off the A836 north of Castletown, scan across Dunnet Bay and the large dunes to the north. Seaduck regularly occur here, with the odd **Velvet** and **Surf** to be found among the **Common Scoters**; **Long-tailed Ducks** congregate in groups of up to 300 in Dunnet Bay before moving north. Check the bay for divers, too; all four regular species occurred last May, with a peak of 80 **Great Northern**s in April. **Slavonian Grebe** and even **Leach's Storm-petrel** have been seen here too.

Around Castlehill, and on the beach, look for waders such as **Ringed Plover**, **Knot**, **Sanderling** and **Purple Sandpiper**; there may also be **Little Gulls** near the outfall. **Bonaparte's Gull** has occurred in the last three years. A Red-rumped Swallow was seen here in April 2012, Common Rosefinch in 2013 and Green Woodpecker (quite the rarity here) in 2014.

Stop at the Highland Council's

Seadrift visitor centre for a natural history display, information and toilets. Continue north and turn left after the Northern Sands Hotel onto the B855, signposted Dunnet Head (ND 220712) **2**. On your left, you will see the near-circular St John's Loch. In recent years, **Lesser Scaup** has been annual here among the rafts of Tufted Duck.

Continuing along this road, you will soon see a sign to St John's Pool (ND 220727) **3**. This privately owned site welcomes visitors and will surely boost your trip list.

Nesting species include **Sandwich**, **Common** and **Arctic Terns**, along with **Black-headed Gulls** and a variety of waterbirds. Passage species are varied and could include **Garganey**, **Northern Pintail**, **Green Sandpiper** and **Tree Pipit**. Up to seven dabbling duck species might be seen on a spring visit. Look out too for the occasional Little Gull, **Eurasian Whimbrel**, **Grasshopper Warbler** and other rarer migrants such as **Wood Sandpiper** or **Grey Phalarope**.

Returning to the B855, continue towards Dunnet Head, taking a left through the hamlet of Brough. After the village, you will see a small community woodland (ND 216740) **4**, which is worth checking for any migrants.

Then head straight across the moorland, checking for **Hen Harrier**, **Short-eared Owl** and possibly **Great** and **Arctic Skuas** on the way. Look out too for **Northern Wheatear** and **European Stonechat** perched atop the gorge.



The privately owned St John's Pool is home to a variety of nesting gulls and terns, including Sandwich Tern.

The road rises and enters the boundary wall at Dunnet Head. Here you may use the Highland Council car park (ND 201766) **5** and explore the area on foot. You should see **Puffin**, **Razorbill**, **Common Guillemot**, **Northern Fulmar** and **Kittiwake**.

Try walking out along the cliff-top trail to the west of the walled area entrance to look back at the cliffs beneath the car park, looking out for passing **Northern Gannet**, **Raven** croning above, **Rock Pipit** and locally uncommon **Shag**. Other specialities include

Twite; look for displaying birds in spring. Check the pigeons too: these are real **Rock Doves**, locally a key food item for **Peregrine Falcon**.

Whooper Swans and **Pink-footed Geese** can sometimes be seen heading out to sea from here to Iceland, passing the lighthouse usually before 8 am in March or April. You might see **Greenland White-fronted Geese**, which tend to depart in April or early May. If you are lucky, there is also the chance of passerines such as a **Ring Ouzel** in April. ■

i VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



• **Best Birdwatching Sites: Scottish Highlands** by Gordon Hamlett (Buckingham Press, £17.95) – order from £15.95 on page 77.
• **The Top 52 Birdwatching Sites in the Highlands** (from RSPB North Scotland, £4.50, nsro@rspb.org.uk).

> Sites and access

All sites allow free access and car parking. The nearest train station is at Thurso. Stagecoach Bus runs the local services and route 80 will get you from Thurso to Castletown, Dunnet or Brough. Most of this route is on level ground and has a reasonable surface; however, St John's Pool has a gravel access path and the cliff viewpoint at Dunnet Head is steep.

> Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 451 and Landranger 7.

> Web resources

- www.rspb.org.uk/dunnethead for more information on the RSPB reserve.
- www.the-soc.org.uk/whats-on/local-branches-2/caithness/ for the Caithness branch of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club.
- www.stjohnspool-birds.co.uk for St John's Pool.
- Follow on Twitter: @RSPBNorthScot.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps



6

BROWNSTOWN HEAD, HELVICK HEAD AND CUNNIGAR

By Micheál Cowming

Where and why

Co Waterford nestles between Wexford to the east and Cork to the west on Ireland's south coast. This relatively small county has much to offer birders seeking the thrill of bird migration away from more popular haunts along the south coast. Spring migration can be very exciting, particularly at the county's two most popular headlands: Brownstown in the east and Helvick further west. Both headlands are also in close proximity to productive tidal estuaries, namely Tramore Backstrand and Dungarvan Harbour respectively.

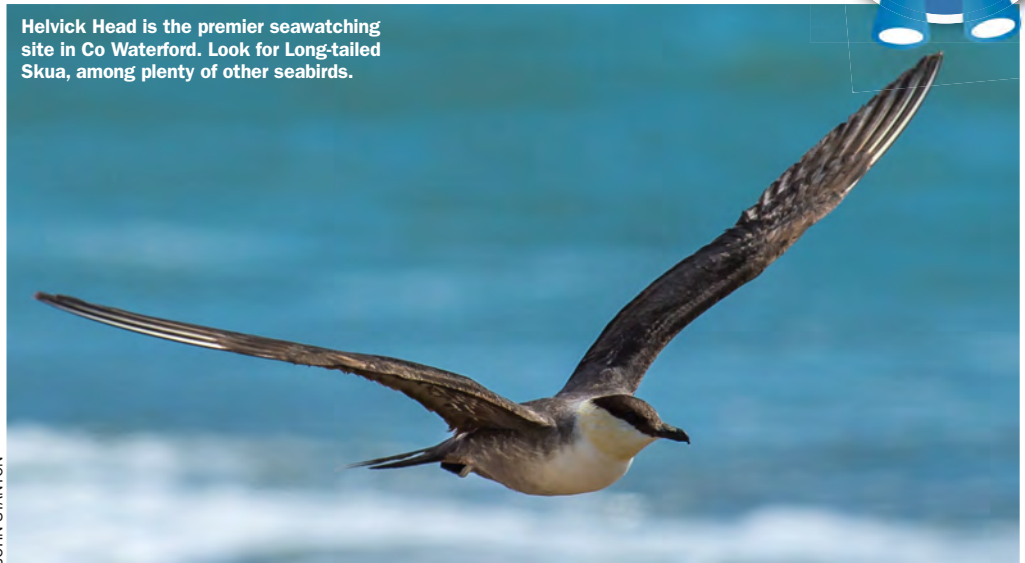
Route planner

Start at Brownstown Head **1** for a good chance of landbird migrants and seawatching. Exit the N25 on the outskirts of Waterford city and follow the R710 ring road south-east. Take the R708 south and continue past the airport to the T-junction. Turn left and continue for about a mile, passing Corbally church on the left. Take the next right and continue to the ruined farmhouses at the end, where tarmac turns to dirt track. Park here (X 619985).

Check the gardens for passage migrants such as **Pied Flycatcher**, **Firecrest** and **Garden Warbler**. Continue towards the two towers on the head itself via the dirt track. This area can be productive for **Yellow Wagtail**, **Whinchat**, **Common Redstart**, **Lesser Whitethroat** and **Ring Ouzel**. The fields to the west of the track can be walked, providing many ditches to scout for scarce and rare migrants.

Helvick Head is the premier seawatching site in Co Waterford. Look for Long-tailed Skua, among plenty of other seabirds.

JOHN STANTON



Brownstown Head is one of the most productive sites in Co Waterford for rare passage migrants such as **Little Bittern**, **Subalpine Warbler** and **Tawny Pipit**. In June 2010, Ireland's first Iberian Chiffchaff was found singing in the gardens.

Leaving the head, take the left turn signposted Saleen and park at the bottom of the narrow road (S 627005). From here, a great view of Tramore Backstrand offers the chance to see gulls and waders. **Spoonbill** and even **Glossy Ibis** are possible here.

Continue west to Dungarvan via the N25 or the R675.

Approximately 3 miles outside Dungarvan, heading for Cork on the N25, take the R674 left for Helvick Head **2**, another good place for landbird migrants and seawatching. Park at the pier (X 313892). Helvick is the premier

seawatching site in Co Waterford.

Follow the small path to the cove from the pier. From here, many passage seabird species can be seen. Typically in spring, this is an ideal spot to witness the passage of **Pomarine Skuas** in good numbers. Sightings of **Great, Arctic** and the occasional **Long-tailed Skuas** and **Black** and **Roseate Terns** are also possible from this vantage point.

For a more expansive view east to west, the more adventurous birder can scale the head itself. This can be a rewarding experience, offering closer views of birds as they pass in the right conditions. Scan the ditches and fields on the way for landbird migrants such as **Common Cuckoo**, various **warblers** and the occasional **Ring Ouzel**. Care should be taken as the cliffs are high and the ground uneven.

The gardens above the pier can be very productive in spring. Look for **Garden Warbler**, **Common Redstart**, **Firecrest** and **Lesser Whitethroat** along the ditches and bushes.

Helvick has produced **Alpine Swift**, **Red-footed Falcon** and **Woodchat Shrike** in spring.

Returning along the R674, take the right turn signposted Coláiste na Rinne for Cunnigar **3**. Drive to the bottom of the hill and turn right into Cunnigar car park (X 274896). This sand spit runs into Dungarvan Harbour and stretches for approximately 1.5 miles. Spring migrants such as **Northern Wheatear** and **Eurasian Whimbrel** are easily encountered here in good numbers along with the occasional scarcity such as **Little Tern**. Keep an eye on the **Dunlin** flocks travelling north for the chance of a rarer wader. ■



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



Where to Watch Birds in Ireland by Clive Hutchinson and Paul Milne (second edition, Christopher Helm, £18.99) – order from £16.99 on page 77.

Sites and access

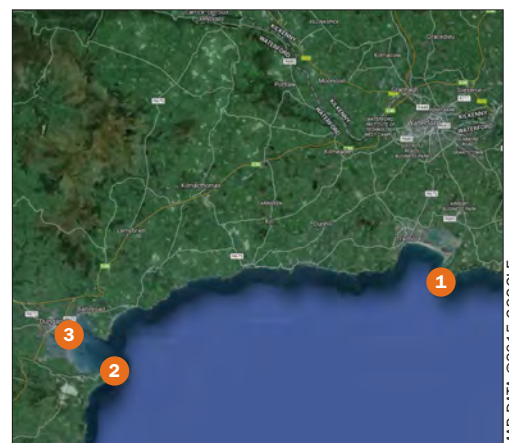
The fields on both sides of the dirt track at Brownstown Head are private farmland. Generally, birders are permitted to access the fields to the west of the track only. At Helvick Head, the path to the cove is short and well maintained. The roads above the pier are short, small and narrow, and best walked to check the gardens. Cars should be parked at the pier or along the cul-de-sac just above it. Helvick is situated in a native Irish-speaking (Gaeltacht) area, so all signposts for the town will be displayed as Ceann Heilbhic (Helvick Head). The Cunnigar (An Coinigéar), although free to roam, is private farmland. The seaward side is sandy beach. The inner shoreline is generally rocky and the main track grassy.

Maps

Ordnance Survey Ireland Discovery Series 76 and 82.

Web resources

- www.waterfordbirds.com for information on birding in Co Waterford.
- Follow on Twitter: @watbirds and @BrownstownBirds.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps

MAP DATA ©2015 GOOGLE



APRIL'S TARGET BIRD

Red-rumped Swallow



Although Red-rumped Swallow breeds in southern Europe (above) and winters in Africa, overshooting individuals are being recorded in Britain in increasing numbers, like this bird at Moreton, Cheshire, in May 2008 (right).

OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

This attractive Mediterranean species is a scarce visitor to our shores which has been increasing in numbers as its range extends on the Continent.

There are 10 subspecies. The one that occurs regularly in Britain is *rufula*, which breeds from north-west Africa and Iberia across to the Middle East, wintering in Africa. 'Asian' Red-rumped Swallow was added to the British list in 2013 after an individual was seen on Orkney and later on Skye, Argyll, in June 2011; the actual subspecies was not determined and was either *daurica* or *japonica*. The Asian forms are not difficult to separate from western ones, and as they are also distinct geographically they may well be separated at species level in the future.

Most spring birds are seen in April and May, although the earliest ever was at the beginning of February. In spring 2003 there was an unusual influx, with 35 birds over a few days in late April and early May. The species ceased to be regarded as a rarity in Britain after 2005, at which

time there were 15-20 sightings a year. Since then numbers have increased, with more than 30 per year on average recently; a record 57 were seen in 2009.

Birds occasionally appear in autumn, but during October and November 1987 an exceptional 52 were seen. While most are individuals, twos and threes do occur and during the 1987 influx five, possibly seven, were seen at Point of Air, Clwyd. Many are seen flying by or stay for only one day, but some linger – one individual in Dorset stayed for 55 days from July 1988 and was thought to be on territory.

How to see

Red-rumped Swallows are classic overshooting migrants from southern Europe. The best weather conditions for any to arrive here are a southerly airflow from Iberia to Britain in mid-April through to May. While some birds are seen flying past migration watchpoints, many are discovered feeding over inland lakes and gravel pits with other hirundines, and it is these which may stay for more than a day. ■



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)



FIND YOUR OWN

Sightings are widely spread across the whole of England; the species is very rare but almost annual in Scotland, where most are seen along the east coast up to the Northern Isles, and it is even rarer in Wales. Red-rumped Swallow has been recorded in every English county, but most occur along the south coast as far as Scilly, and up the east coast as far as Yorkshire. There are few places which record the species with any regularity, but the ones listed below have had several sightings over the years.

England

- **Scilly:** St Mary's (SV 923107)
- **Dorset:** Lodmoor RSPB (SY 688809)
- **Kent:** Dungeness RSPB (TR 062197) and Grove Ferry NNR (TR 237631)
- **Suffolk:** Minsmere RSPB (TM 473672)
- **Norfolk:** Cley Marshes NNR (TG 053440)
- **Lincolnshire:** Gibraltar Point NNR (TF 556581)
- **East Yorkshire:** Spurn Point (TA 419148)



VISIT WWW.BIRDWATCH.CO.UK FOR TIPS ON FINDING MANY MORE TARGET BIRDS



MARK AVERY

Hen Harriers need you

Last year really brought the plight of this persecuted raptor to the attention of the public but, says **Mark Avery**, there's still much to do if we are to protect the species.

Last year was a big one for friends of the Hen Harrier – and for its enemies. We need to make sure that 2015 turns up the heat on wildlife crime even more.

Birdwatch helped to shine a spotlight on the plight of this much-persecuted bird through its August cover with the words 'Stop killing our harriers!' and a series of articles promoting Hen Harrier Day and the plight of the bird. The RSPB magazine and *British Wildlife* also put Hen Harriers on their covers following *Birdwatch*. *The Guardian* carried a long article on the conflict between grouse shooting and Hen Harriers, while *Countryfile* discussed the pros and cons of grouse shooting. Like never before, the industry was being asked to justify itself: how can a field 'sport' that generates such high levels of wildlife crime be acceptable in this day and age?

Hen Harrier Day events in Lancashire, Derbyshire, Northumberland and Dorset attracted hundreds of people who wanted to show their support for this threatened bird, and who wanted decision-makers to do more to protect it from illegal persecution.

Lush Cosmetics took the message of wildlife crime to its shops and generated more than 20,000 postcards, signed by the public, which were delivered to Buckingham Palace last autumn.

Grouse about

Marks and Spencer reversed its decision to sell grouse meat in London shops because the company recognised that it couldn't guarantee its suppliers were sustainable or sticking to the law. The RSPB called for grouse moors to be licensed, while the charity's complaint to the EU over the UK's record on burning of protected blanket bogs rumbled on.

A major environmental study found that grouse-moor management (particularly heather burning and draining) increases greenhouse gas emissions, pollutes watercourses and reduces the aquatic life in upland streams.

An e-petition launched in late May calling for driven grouse shooting to be banned because of its environmental impacts and



Despite the bad weather, hundreds of people – including our columnist (centre) – turned up at Hen Harrier Day events across the country.

“Last year saw the start of a popular movement which began to prick the consciences of some in the shooting world and even some politicians”

its dependence on wildlife crime reached 20,000 signatures by Christmas. This really rattled the grouse-shooting world as they are unaccustomed to being challenged in public.

It is difficult to believe that all this would have happened were it not for the hard work of the recently founded Birders Against Wildlife Crime, the fantastic support of Chris Packham, the Northwest Raptor Protection Group and, most of all, support from birders across the country. Last year saw the start of a popular movement which prodded the RSPB into greater action, raised the issue with the media and began to prick the consciences of some in the shooting world and even some politicians. It was a good start, but there isn't yet a single extra Hen Harrier to show for it.

This year has to be even bigger, and plans are afoot for Hen Harrier Day 2015 – Sunday 9 August. We need to keep up the momentum, so please be ready to respond to calls for action. Britain's Hen Harriers need you! ■



Do this in April

- If it is March as you read this, then you still have time to add your name to 21,000 others calling for a ban on driven grouse shooting at <http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/petitions/65627>.
- If it is April, then ask your MP what they plan to do to help Hen Harrier and other illegally killed birds of prey if they are re-elected on 7 May.
- Save the date of 9 August 2015 for this year's Hen Harrier Day – more details soon.

Birdwatch World of birds

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As we head north-east, we will stop at known hot-spots to search for Harlequin Duck, Ptarmigan, White-tailed Eagle and various waders and gulls, as well as Arctic Fox. We may also encounter unexpected species at this time of migration.

We'll spend a day at Lake Mývatn, about 40 miles east of Akureyri. One of Iceland's largest lakes, it is famous for Barrow's Goldeneye and Harlequin Duck, both of which breed in Iceland but nowhere else in Europe. The surrounding area is also good for Gyr Falcon, and this will be another of our key targets.

On the morning of the final day, there will still be time to look for any missed species. We'll then leave for the harbour in Akureyri, where we board our ship and start our new adventure on the *Plancius*.

■ This tour is operated for Birdwatch by Birding Breaks (registered with the Chamber of Commerce in Amsterdam under licence number 54226104). The price includes all accommodation and food on board ship on a full-board basis, as well as expert guiding. For further information, reservations and full details of the Iceland pre-tour and what's not included, please call the company on 0031 20 77 92 030 or email info@birdingbreaks.nl.



GYR FALCON BY LAURENS STEIN



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This unique voyage starts at Akureyri on the north coast of Iceland, where we will board the *Plancius*, a comfortable and well-equipped expedition ship. As we set sail we'll search inshore waters for the specialities for which Iceland is most famous: Harlequin

Duck, Barrow's Goldeneye and Brünnich's Guillemot.

Other possible seabirds include Great, Pomarine, Arctic and Long-tailed Skuas, Sabine's Gull and Leach's Storm-petrel, and we'll keep a look out for shearwaters and anything unusual among the many other commoner seabirds. Several different species of whale and dolphin are also possible, as are passerine migrants which may take the opportunity to rest on board our ship. At night, if conditions are right, the *aurora borealis* (or Northern Lights) may illuminate the darkness with an ethereal green glow.

In a little over three days we'll have passed the scenic Faroe Islands and be well on the way to the legendary Fair Isle. Here, at the southernmost point of the Shetland Isles, we will land on day four and spend the entire day scouring the island for migrants. At this time of

the year Fair Isle is arguably at its finest, and rare migrants and vagrants are not uncommon. On a good day there is chance of scarcities such as Yellow-browed Warbler, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Common Rosefinch and Red-backed Shrike. We can hope for even better birds such as Lanceolated Warbler and Pechora Pipit. The seas that surround Fair Isle also offer good cetacean-watching opportunities.

We'll then sail south over the next two days through the North Sea, keeping an eye out en route for birds such as Red-throated Diver, Leach's Storm-petrel, Sooty and Manx Shearwaters and Arctic, Pomarine and Long-tailed Skuas, as well as the passerines and raptors that are sometimes lost at sea during this key migration time. On day seven our journey finally comes to an end in the Dutch port of Vlissingen.

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Monitoring martins

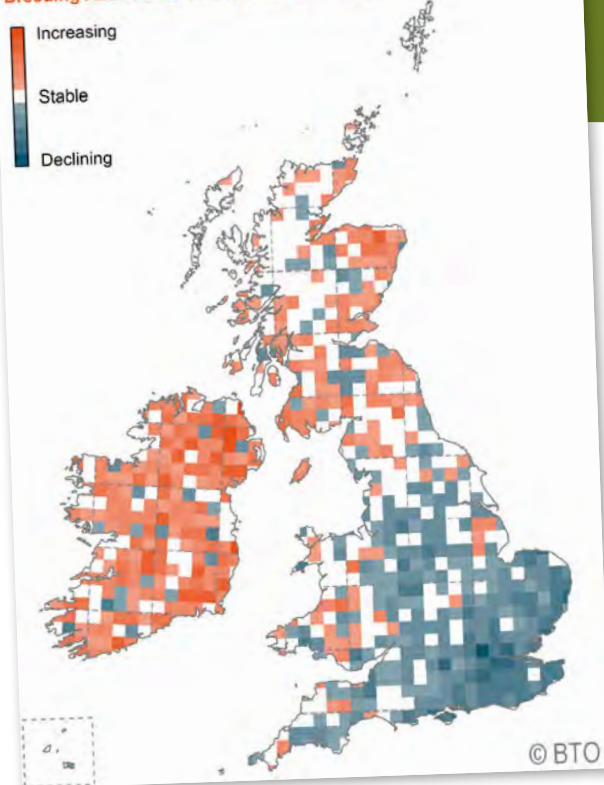


PETER CAIRNS



A common sight during the summer months, House Martin has suffered a catastrophic decline in England, and no one knows why. A new British Trust for Ornithology study aims to discover the reasons behind the decrease, says BTO Research Officer **Ian Woodward**.

Breeding Abundance Change 1988-91 to 2008-11



House Martin is a familiar summer visitor to Britain, usually present from April until October. The species breeds in loose colonies ranging from several nests to more than 100. These are constructed from mud and located under the eaves of houses or other buildings. Most pairs raise two broods during the course of a breeding season, with young from the second brood often still in the nest during September and sometimes even into October.

A small number of natural cliff nests still exist in Britain

on both coastal and inland sites, but the vast majority of our birds now use human sites, and nests can be found everywhere from isolated homesteads to dense urban areas. However, most colonies are in villages or on the outskirts of towns, where there are enough houses to provide a good selection of nest sites, alongside habitats such as wetland and woodland that provide mud to build nests and abundant aerial insects for food.

Site faithful

Although House Martins usually return to the same breeding sites from year to year, the population can be difficult to monitor by traditional methods, as colony size can fluctuate markedly and

Despite being a familiar sight during the summer, House Martin (above) has suffered a worrying decline of 69 per cent between 1967 and 2012 in England, with the BTO map showing changes in breeding abundance (left) clearly demonstrating a huge loss in numbers between 1988-91 and 2008-11.



PETER DEDICAT (WWW.BTO.ORG)



JOHN HARDING (WWW.BTO.ORG)

House Martins require suitable sites – usually under the eaves of houses – and plenty of mud to build their nests. It is possible that modern house-construction practices which reduce building cavities and decreased grazing stock creating mud combine to reduce the number of good sites.

new nest sites can occur some distance from the main colony.

Long-term monitoring data suggest that the species is declining in England, where numbers fell by a huge 69 per cent between 1967 and 2012, based on figures from the Common Bird Census and the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS). The relative abundance maps from *Bird Atlas 2007-11* also show strong declines in England. In contrast, however, both BBS and *Atlas* data show that House Martins are increasing in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, this growth does not offset the declines elsewhere, and House Martins are currently Amber listed as Birds of Conservation Concern in the UK.

At face value, breeding requirements for House Martins seem very simple: somewhere safe to build a nest, mud to build it with and a ready supply of aerial

insects to feed themselves and their young. An explanation for the English decreases may be hard to come by.

The pattern of House Martin declines in England and increases in Scotland is matched by a number of other species including Common Cuckoo and Willow Warbler, and climate change is a possible cause. Research suggests that the distribution of a number of European species is moving roughly north in response to climate change, probably mostly because of rising temperatures, but possibly also in response to other climate-induced changes such as rainfall levels.

Linking climate change and House Martin distribution changes is persuasive, but the issue is far from clear cut. Like climate change, land-use changes may also have had a substantial

effect on both mud and insect supplies. Agricultural intensification is believed to have caused reductions in insect abundance, while changes to grazing stock levels may also affect insect numbers, as well as the availability of mud which livestock create by trampling. Insect abundance may be affected by urban and industrial development and pollution, too.

In recent years, many conservation organisations have expressed concerns about the low numbers of insects in the wider countryside, and the *State of Nature 2013* report by 25 conservation and research organisations looked at known trends for various species since the 1960s or more recently for species where longer-term trends were unavailable. They found that invertebrates had fared particularly badly: 65 per cent of monitored moth species and 72 per cent of carabid beetles had declined, and most other invertebrate groups had more species declining than increasing.

Even when both mud and food supplies are available, House Martins still need to find suitable locations for nesting. These seem to be readily available, but some observers have noted that the PVC fascias and soffit boards that cover the ends of roof rafters have caused House Martins to abandon previously used sites, possibly because they find it difficult to stick mud to these plastic surfaces.

Direct human interference may also have an impact. Young House Martins defecate out of the nest, and homeowners are often unwilling to tolerate the mess they make, leading to the destruction of nests and the prevention of access to previous nest sites using wire or hanging objects.

Cause and effect

Although any combination of these potential causes could help explain the reason for the decline in House Martins in Britain, most information is anecdotal and there is little, if any, scientific evidence to clearly link this to any factor. As well as those discussed above, a number of other possible causes exist, including competition from House Sparrows, predation, and problems occurring during migration and on the species' wintering grounds. In reality, the picture may be complicated with a number of contributory factors, and may take some time to investigate, as has been the case with the decline in House Sparrow numbers.

Data collection

Over the next two years, the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) will be undertaking research to start answering some of the questions. An important first step will be taking place this summer with the UK House Martin Survey, specifically targeting this species in order to produce a robust population estimate.

This nationwide survey will involve volunteers visiting 2,000-3,000 1-km squares throughout the UK. The findings will provide a baseline against which changes in the House Martin population can be accurately measured in the future. A secondary aim of this year's survey will be to collect a small amount of information about colony and nest sites to undertake some preliminary analyses of nesting preferences.

Further work in 2016 will focus on individual nests and collect information about the timing of nesting activity across the UK, and about the success or failure of nesting attempts. This will involve volunteers watching a nest or a small number of nests during the course of the breeding season to record what activity is observed, and so will be ideal for those who have House Martins nesting on their homes.

Over the next two years, these two surveys will collect more information on population size, breeding ecology and habitat preferences of House Martin, so we can begin to tackle some key questions about this eagerly awaited but sadly declining summer visitor. ■



JOHN W. WALTON (WWW.BTO.ORG)



Above: the possible causes for the House Martin decline are many and varied. The BTO is hoping to find out more with its new UK House Martin Survey; see the box below to find out how you can help.

Left: breeding House Martins require a ready supply of insects to feed their young. Insect abundance is falling rapidly in Britain, with studies showing declines in 65 per cent of monitored moth species and 72 per cent of carabid beetles since the 1960s.

GET INVOLVED

THE BTO is looking for volunteers to carry out two or three visits to a 1-km square between late May and mid-July. The survey will involve walking around the square looking for House Martins and their nests and mapping and recording a few details about any nests found. Each visit will normally take around two to three hours; however, the visit length depends on the habitats within the square and visits to urban squares may take longer.

If you would like to take part in the UK House Martin Survey or find out more information, please visit www.bto.org/house-martins. ■

DOUG WELCH (WWW.BTO.ORG)

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The lord of hosts

The parasitic lifestyle of Common Cuckoo is legendary, and the latest research has shed light on the evolution of this behaviour as well as illuminating the possibility of cryptic forms concealed within the species' ranks. **David Callahan** investigates.

It has been known for some time that Common Cuckoo is more of an African species than European, only spending a few months in the Northern Hemisphere to breed.

As a brood parasite, an augur of spring and a long-distance migrant from Africa in steady decline, Common Cuckoo has much to offer scientific researchers, with complex evolution and multifarious obscure behaviour patterns. It has attracted much research, and there have been many revelations in recent years, including a hidden variety of potential subspecies and forms, the intricacies of host relationships, the species' migration stop-over sites and wintering areas, and how it evolved during the radical changes in landscape and climate during the Ice Age.

We suspect that brood parasitism originally evolved with a shift to more open habitats, a change to seasonal caterpillars as diet, and the adoption of long-distance migration. The more energy that could be saved during breeding the better, as a short-lived diet and long migration are resource costly.

Common Cuckoo's parasitical habits were first reported by Aristotle in the fourth century BC. It has also long been known

that cuckoo eggs closely match those of each host and that the female lays the eggs while the host's clutch is incomplete, often eating eggs already present to replenish its calcium and protein reserves. The notion that female cuckoos always lay the same kind of host-mimetic egg as a result of natural selection became established in the 19th century.

Cold war

Interactions between Common Cuckoo and its 100 or more recorded host species are now viewed as an 'arms race', with cuckoo and host co-evolving in unison, each successive adaptation produced a counter-adaptation in the opposite species. Hosts discriminate against unusual-looking eggs, driving the evolution of cuckoo egg patterns, and those able to tell the difference between cuckoo eggs and their own are more likely to maintain their genetic line.

Despite the recorded numbers of parasitised species, female



Female Common Cuckoo will remove existing host eggs from any nest it has chosen to parasitise. This Reed Warbler egg will usually be eaten by the cuckoo, providing essential protein and calcium for its own egg production.



Common Cuckoo eggs approximate the size, colours and patterns of host eggs, like this interloper in a Reed Warbler nest. While clearly different, it will frequently be close enough in form to fool the host species.



GEORGE RESZETER (WWW.BIRDSOFEUROPE.CO.UK)

Cuckoo egg ejection behaviour is thought to have evolved from the similar method of removing faecal sacs from the nest to keep it clean. These eggs will have been laid after the female cuckoo visited this Reed Warbler nest.



REBECCA NASON (WWW.REBECCANASON.COM)

Filling the entire Reed Warbler nest, and with a prominent orange gape, this Common Cuckoo chick in a Reed Warbler nest at Wicken Fen, Cambridgeshire, still manages to fool the imprinted host parents.

cuckoos specialise in a smaller number of major hosts, but keep their options open if that species is not available. In Japan, there are four main 'gentes' (singular 'gens' – the term used for distinct types of host-specific cuckoo strain) specialising in Oriental Reed Warbler, Bull-headed Shrike, Azure-winged Magpie and Black-faced Bunting respectively. In Europe, some areas have just one gens; for instance parts of Norway have only the Meadow Pipit gens, some marshes of Britain have only the Reed Warbler gens, while the Hungarian Great Plain has one specialising in Great Reed Warbler.

In Japan, analysis of cuckoo eggs by spectrophotometry – measuring the absorption of light by different chemicals and pigments – has shown that low matching of UV light patterning results in the rejection of eggs; all four host species use different habitats (though in close proximity), and this separation is reflected in egg patterning. There is evidence that parasitism there began in Black-faced Bunting, with specialisation in Azure-winged Magpie beginning just 30 years ago, demonstrating how rapidly cuckoos can cross over. The four Japanese gentes are also not nearly as differentiated as those in the rest of Eurasia, suggesting a more recent colonisation.

Egg mimicry isn't perfect: just 5 per cent were effectively indistinguishable and only 25 per cent considered 'good mimicry' in a recent study. Most cuckoo eggs resemble the host's closely

enough to be accepted into a clutch, but imperfect matching may also indicate that male cuckoos are not as host specific, and their genes 'water down' the disguises produced by females. If true, this may in turn indicate that cuckoo gentes are 'false subspecies' and that gene flow occurs fairly often. Female specialisation in particular hosts is detectable in their mitochondrial DNA (which is passed down on the female line), but the genes concerned are known to have evolved recently and cuckoos have switched hosts frequently during that time. The adaptations seem to have remained 'plastic' despite being genetically embedded.

More fool you

Cuckoos have several ways of fooling hosts into accepting their eggs, in addition to mimicry and small egg size. Ongoing work since the 1980s on Reed Warblers and Common Cuckoos in Wicken Fen, Cambridgeshire, has revealed that rapid visits by females, delaying laying until the afternoon and quick removal of host eggs (and those of other cuckoos) all maximise the chances of success. While some cuckoo eggs are rejected, hosts seem not to be put off by the huge, heavily barred cuckoo nestling, and transplanting experiments have shown that they don't discriminate against other host species either. Brown-headed Cowbird – another brood parasite – ejects 'foreign' eggs from host nests in the same way it disposes of faecal sacs, so this



NEIL BOWMAN

Dunnock is another regular major host type for Common Cuckoo in Europe. All hosts continue to feed the cuckoo chick well after it leaves the confines of the comparatively compact nest, until it is fully fledged.



The rufous or hepatic morph of Common Cuckoo is much scarcer than the familiar grey plumage, but appears to be maintained by taking advantage of the host species being unfamiliar with it and failing to defend itself.

behaviour could have developed simply and quickly.

Common Cuckoo females have two colour forms: a common grey and a more unusual rufous (aka 'hepatic') morph, specifically adapted to undermine host defences by mimicking Sparrowhawk, to deter host attacks, and scare them away from their nests while the female cuckoo lays its eggs. However, the fears of the host can be overcome by communal mobbing. Species of songbird that aren't parasitised also mob cuckoos, showing that the Sparrowhawk-like plumage is certainly enough to trigger the behaviour, though the other morph often remains immune from these attentions. In this scenario, the rarer morph can sneak under the radar and deposit its eggs.

We can now see that there are three layers of mimicry in cuckoos: the adult's hawk-like plumage, the chick's calls and the shell patterns and size of the egg. However, the genetic war between cuckoo and host has produced evolutionary consequences, turning our conceptions of what species and subspecies are on their heads.

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* has four generally recognised subspecies: nominate, breeding from Britain across Eurasia to Japan, and wintering in Africa and southern Asia; *bakeri*, breeding from China to the Himalayan foothills of northern India, and wintering in South-East Asia; *bangsi*, which breeds in Iberia and North Africa, and winters in sub-Saharan Africa; and *subtelephonus*, which breeds in southern Central Asia, heading to southern Asia and Africa to winter.

Further complications

This taxonomic arrangement is complicated by different strains of Common Cuckoo female specialising in parasitising particular host species, being adapted to mimic their egg colours and patterns. Host-specific females also appear to be spread across Common Cuckoo's range rather than locally adapted, and are not any less likely to parasitise their main host – for example, Reed Warbler – when other potential host species such as Dunnock are present. Each major host-specific cuckoo type may actually be a subspecies in itself.

Differences between individuals, sexes and species are also aural. However, long-distance comparisons of male calls

found differences between single birds but no significant regional variations – the populations are well mixed. As cuckoo vocalisations are mostly not learned but transferred genetically (singing adult cuckoos being long gone by the time their chicks are hatched), it seems that males of each host type are not genetically well separated despite their apparent affinity. A recent study found that each of the currently accepted subspecies is vocally differentiated. The subspecies *subtelephonus* was particularly unique, and could be assigned in 98 per cent of individuals.

Call variation does exist according to habitat type, where males and females show a clear difference between cuckoos that use wetlands and those that use forests. However, we are still some way off declaring these call-types separate taxa in their own right. No physical or genetic differences have been identified, and it is possible that despite the apparent separation of host and habitat, some imitative influence may occur between adjacent cuckoo types in mixed habitats. Calls can be adapted to different acoustic environments, and it is not known how flexible the calls of Common Cuckoo are in this respect.

Curiously, a cuckoo chick's begging calls, while imitative of the host chicks, replicate the sounds of a whole brood rather than a single youngster, and hosts increase their feeding visits accordingly. This behaviour also compensates for the lack of multiple gapes to stimulate feeding.

A recently published book in Norwegian asserts that Common Cuckoos which parasitise Common Redstart there are genetically closer to Indian Cuckoo *C. micropterus*, despite being physically and vocally indistinguishable from *C. canorus*. Peer-reviewed data on these claims is unavailable at present, but it seems there may be a cryptic cuckoo species breeding in the Western Palearctic. A plan to radio-tag these birds in 2012 to see if they wintered in the Indian subcontinent has not yet produced published results.

Passage to Africa

Perhaps the greatest amount of information regarding the migration of Common Cuckoo has been accumulated recently by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and its



Top: 'Martin', one of the first of the BTO's Common Cuckoos to be tracked back to Africa, has its tag fitted. Though the tag looks large, it only weighs 5 g, and uses GPS technology accurate to within a few metres. Above: BTO team members compare the wings of three individual male Common Cuckoos at the original ringing site in Norfolk, during the second year of the project.

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Cuckoo Tracking Project. The first official results will be formally presented later this year, but initial gleanings from the 31 (mostly male) birds satellite-tagged in the first four years have been fascinating. Only one cuckoo has survived for the duration of the project, and the apparent losses often in the first year of a cuckoo's life underline the dangers they face, despite not having to raise chicks.

The scheme has revealed that adult male Common Cuckoos start to leave Britain surprisingly early during June, and are gone by the end of July. Females remain a few weeks later to lay eggs, but juveniles don't leave until August or September. Males take two main routes back to sub-Saharan Africa, one via Iberia across the desert to western and then Central Africa, the other via Italy then directly to the same wintering areas. Iberia was a previously unknown route, having its own smaller subspecies which British cuckoos were thought not to mix with. Wetter summer weather here and en route seems to have a very detrimental effect on survival, hindering travel and limiting food availability. Lack of food causes cuckoos to return partially north, wander for long distances or linger in southern Europe.

Clearly, there is further exploration of all these avenues to be done. Comparing the co-evolved genomes of host and parasite species could reveal intricacies of long-term responses between the two, particularly in changes of egg coloration or plumage, and the development of morphs or variations. Figuring out how male cuckoos from different host lineages still fertilise host-dependent females without changing egg patterning may come from similar research. We already know that egg colour genes can evolve very rapidly and are not restricted to female chromosomes.

The use of digital cameras, spectrophotometers and sound recording could further reveal stimuli which control parasite and host response to nests, eggs and chicks, and to what extent imperfections in mimicry risk a positive outcome for the cuckoo. Work could also be done on whether the number of host species available helps or hinders local adaptation to new hosts.

The BTO's tracking work is to be extended into Europe, and collaboration in other countries will widen the picture. Greater accuracy and a larger database will develop, revealing further stop-over and migration routes, and enabling protection of the necessary habitats on the way.

Despite this, we are gradually reaching a much deeper understanding of the lifestyle of that almost mythical species, Common Cuckoo. ■

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Spotted, Little and Baillon's Crakes

PHOTO GUIDE



RAFAEL ARMADA (WWW.RAFELARMADA.NET)

1 Spotted (left) and Baillon's (right) Crakes (Catalonia, Spain, 9 April 2005). This remarkable image shows two crake species together. On the left is the dumpy, stubby-billed shape of a Spotted Crake, typically 'dusted' with white spotting, while to its right a Baillon's Crake shows this species' truly tiny size. The latter is body-on, thereby obscuring its wing-to-tail proportions and barred flanks, but its short bill is readily apparent.

PROFILE



ANDY STODDART is Vice Chairman of the Rarities Committee and has many years' birding experience. He is also author of several books and ID papers.

In most field guides, the regular British crakes appear fairly easy to identify. However, with these secretive species usually giving just the briefest of glimpses, this is not always the case. Each may have to be identified on the basis of a shadowy form passing across a reedbed ride or through the closely packed stems, or even the flash of a slender rear-end fast disappearing into the depths. **Andy Stoddart** shows you what to look for if you happen across one of these elusive, enigmatic rallids.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

Cranes and rails are something of an enigma, usually (although not always) difficult to see. Even Water Rail can be a challenge to glimpse, and very few of us have extensive experience of any of the other species.

Finding a Spotted Crake is likely to be a rare event in one's birding career, while most of us will never locate either a Little or a Baillon's Crake in Britain. These last two are mostly known only from a twitched bird at home or sightings on a foreign holiday.

Although not especially difficult to identify, the main problem is remembering what to look for on what might be a brief, unrepeatable view. With small crakes, the important thing is to go for the key features fast.

Spotted Crake

This species has a large world range extending across the bogs and wet meadows of central and eastern Europe and western Russia. Although we tend not to think of crakes as long-distance migrants, they are in fact some of the world's greatest wanderers, and Spotted Crakes are no exception, those from Europe wintering mostly in Africa.

Although a British breeding species, this must be one of our least-known birds, with most detected only by their characteristic 'whiplash' song. Autumn migrants represent the best chance to catch up with the species. These are as likely to be continental birds as they are British breeders, and traditionally turn up at wetlands in the South-East, where a muddy fringe borders a reedbed. Here, with patience, one might be seen venturing out into

full view before returning to invisibility behind the curtain of reeds.

This is a medium-sized crake, not much smaller than a Water Rail, and sharing that species' buffy undertail coverts. However, its bill is noticeably short, deep based and stubby. Males, females and juveniles are similar in plumage, all sharing the characteristic liberal white spotting on the upperparts, and spotting and barring on the underparts. The bill is yellowish-grey with a red flush at the base.

Little Crake

This species breeds in reedbeds in eastern Europe and western Russia, with many wintering in East Africa. In Britain it is a true rarity, with 108 records to the end of 2013, but only 38 since 1950. Despite the greatly increased number of observers today, it still only occurs at the rate of about six per decade. Most records are from southern and south-east England and there are two clear occurrence peaks – from March to May and September to November – corresponding with the species' migration periods.

It is a truly small crake, but its diminutiveness might not always be obvious, and judging the size of a lone crake is always problematic. Rather than focus on size, it is best to look at structural clues.

Little Crake is short billed, but has a noticeably long tail. The long primary projection is almost the same length as the tertials, with at least five primary tips normally visible; the wing tip falls approximately level with the tail tip.

The sexes differ in plumage. Males are smooth grey below, with limited flank barring, while females are a striking

plain buff colour below, with a grey wash to the face. Autumn juveniles most closely resemble females, but have barring in the mid and rear flanks. All plumages show a clear buff line extending from the mantle sides down the inner webs of the tertials. All plumages also have strongly barred undertail coverts, a ready way to eliminate both Spotted Crake and Water Rail.

Baillon's Crake

This species breeds discontinuously in wet bogs in south-west Europe and then in a more continuous zone from eastern Europe across the whole width of Asia as far as Japan. Its movements are poorly known but, like Little Crake, many European birds are thought to winter in East Africa.

In Britain it has always been rare, although there are 19th century breeding records. There have been 88 records to the end of 2013, but only 23 of these have occurred since 1950. Like Little Crake, sightings are concentrated in southern and south-east England, with the peak periods for discoveries being May to June and September to October (although there are records in all months).

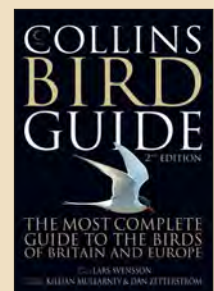
Somewhat surprisingly, reports have recently been on an upward trajectory. After only one in the 1980s, seven occurred in the following decade, three in the 2000s and then an amazing run of singing males discovered during Spotted Crake surveys in 2012. Six such birds have so far been accepted, including at least four at a single site. The reasons for this influx are not entirely clear, but are perhaps linked to drought conditions in the

Mediterranean. Whatever the cause there was no repeat in 2013.

Baillon's is a very small crake, smaller even than Little, though this may be hard to assess. Again it is best to concentrate on structure, Baillon's being particularly short billed and, compared with Little, showing a shorter tail and a shorter primary projection. This is less than half the length of the tertials, with only three primary tips generally visible, and the wing tip falls well short of the tail tip.

The sexes are essentially the same, both resembling male Little Crake with their barred undertail coverts and grey underparts but with much heavier and obvious barring across the whole of the flanks. Autumn juveniles are a buffy colour and show the same extensive heavy flank barring. All plumages lack the buff mantle and tertial line shown by Little Crake. ■

FURTHER READING



Collins Bird Guide by Lars Svensson, Killian Mullarney and Dan Zetterström (HarperCollins)

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2



2 Adult Spotted Crake (Lesvos, Greece, 9 April 2007). The compact but heavy-looking, short-necked, almost 'chicken-like' body shape of Spotted Crake is well shown here, as is the short, deep-based and rather triangular bill. Although this bird's size cannot be established in a photograph (and may not be readily apparent in the field either), its plumage is the real giveaway. The liberal scattering of white spots across the face, neck and underparts is unique to this species.



MARTIN SMART

3



3 Adult male Little Crake (Unst, Shetland, 12 June 2007).

Although the unspotted brown upperparts and smooth grey underparts of this bird are reminiscent of Water Rail, this species is readily eliminated by the shorter greenish, red-based bill. This combination of characters quickly narrows the choice to either Little or Baillon's Crake. In terms of structural features, the wing-to-tail proportions of this bird are hard to evaluate and might even suggest Baillon's, but the bill is too long for that species. The clincher here is the plumage: the smooth unbarred grey flanks and whitish line along the mantle sides and the inner webs of the tertials identify the bird as an adult male Little Crake.



JOHN CARTER

4



4 Adult Baillon's Crake (Mowbray Park, Sunderland, Co Durham, 18 May 1989).

This individual shows a short bill and tail and a short primary projection comprising just three primary tips. This combination of features indicates Baillon's Crake, a diagnosis confirmed by the very strongly barred flanks and the absence of a buffy-white line at the mantle sides.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

5



AURÉLIEN AUDEVARD



5 Spotted Crake (Ouessant, France, 17 July 2008). Adult and juvenile Spotted Crakes are very similar, this bird being rather grey around the face and foreneck, thereby suggesting an adult. Irrespective of its age, however, it can be readily identified as a Spotted Crake by the same features – a dumpy, neckless, appearance, a deep, rather triangular body and a short, deep-based bill. The plumage also looks as though it has been sprinkled with flour.

6



DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

6 Juvenile Baillon's Crake (Raysut, Oman, 21 November 2008). This juvenile Baillon's Crake shows the characteristic tail-to-wing configuration of a short tail combined with a very short primary projection, here barely extending beyond the tertials. This is completely wrong for Little Crake and so clinches the identification. The buffy plumage eliminates adult Baillon's Crake, while the superficially similar female and juvenile Little Crakes are eliminated by the absence of the buffy-white mantle-side and inner tertial line.

7



OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

7 Adult female Little Crane (Lesvos, Greece, 7 April 2007). In sharp contrast to the Baillon's Crane in photo 6, this bird shows a very long tail and a very long primary projection with six primary tips visible beyond the tip of the tertials. These structural characters alone identify it as a Little Crane, while the buffy plumage hues, pale greyish face, whitish mantle-side and inner tertial line both confirm its identity and enable it to be sexed as a female.

8



BILL BASTON (WWW.BILLBASTON.COM)

8 Juvenile Little Crane (Lake Bafa, Turkey, 22 October 2005). This Little Crane also shows the highly distinctive combination of a long tail and six visible primary tips beyond the tertials. The face and underparts are whiter, however, lacking the smooth rich ochre wash shown by adult females, thereby ageing it as a juvenile. Also indicating its age are the white feather tips in the scapulars and wing coverts.



BILL BASTON (WWW.BILLBASTON.COM)

9 Adult Spotted Crake (Lesvos, Greece, 24 April 2009). Often all that can be seen of a crake or rail is a rear view of a bird retreating into the reeds. On such occasions the undertail coverts might be the only feature visible. The smooth buff undertail coverts of this bird identify it as a Spotted Crake. Little and Baillon's Crakes have barred undertail coverts and can be readily eliminated on even the poorest 'going away' view. Other structural and plumage features are also visible, confirming that our bird is a Spotted Crake, in this case a fine spring adult.



JERRY OLDENETTEL (WWW.FLICKR.COM)

10 Adult Sora (Socorro, New Mexico, US, 10 April 2012). The essentially smooth buff (albeit white-tipped) undertail coverts of this bird eliminate both Little and Baillon's Crakes. Thus the bird is either a Spotted Crake or conceivably the dramatically rarer option of a vagrant North American Sora; in this case, the black face and bright yellow bill identify it as an adult of the latter. Note also that Soras lack the transverse white barring present on the tertials of all Spotted Crakes.



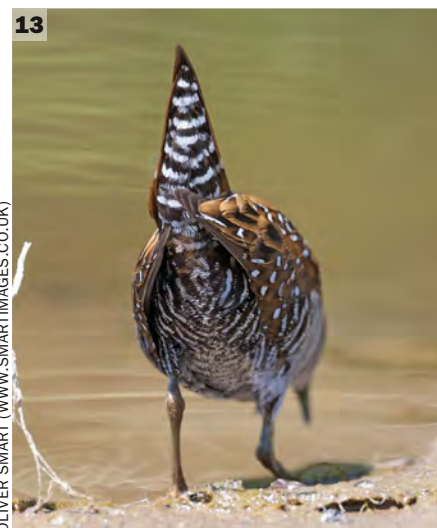
DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDINGETC.COM)

11 Adult Water Rail (Rainham Marshes RSPB, Greater London/Essex, 1 January 2015). This bird has barring in the undertail coverts so it must be one of the two tiny crake species, mustn't it? Sadly, things are not quite so straightforward! With rear views, a major pitfall is Water Rail. This species typically also shows a buffy-white undertail with barring in the centre and base of the feather tract, so must be eliminated before rarer options are considered.



RICHARD BROOKS (WWW.RICHARD-BROOKS.CO.UK)

12 Adult female Little Crake (Lesvos, Greece, 6 April 2007). In this image, the fully barred undertail coverts do indicate one of the two small crake species. Water Rail is quickly eliminated by the short greenish bill. The long tail and primary projection (five primary tips visible), buffy line leading from the mantle sides down the inner webs of the tertials, pale grey face and smooth ochre underparts identify this bird as an adult female Little Crake.



OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

13 Adult Baillon's Crake (Lesvos, Greece, 26 April 2007). Here the combination of a short bill (just visible) and fully barred undertail coverts identify this bird as either a Little or Baillon's Crake. To identify it fully we need to check the tail-to-wing proportions. In this 'head-down' view the tail looks strikingly long, suggesting Little Crake, but a close examination of the wing point with just three primary tips visible shows that this is a Baillon's.

14



PETER BEESLEY

14 Juvenile Spotted Crake (Rutland Water, Leicestershire, 27 August 2014). This young Spotted Crake is easily identified by its characteristic 'chicken-like' proportions, short, deep-based (and here very dull) bill and short neck, while the 'dusting' of white spots on the face, neck and underparts confirm its identity. The dull bill, brown ground colour to the breast, brown ear coverts and heavy spotting around the vent all indicate that this bird is a juvenile.

15



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

15 Adult Sora (Lower Moors, St Mary's, Scilly, 1 October 2005). Although structurally near-identical to Spotted Crake, this adult Sora is easy to identify by virtue of its slightly long-looking yellowish bill, black face and relatively plain tertials. Sora is an extremely rare vagrant but is always worth considering in any encounter with a Spotted Crake, particularly in the late autumn and winter periods.

16

GEORGE RESZETER (WWW.BIRDSOFEUROPE.CO.UK)



16 Adult Spotted Crake (right) with Common Snipe (left) (Agia Varvara, Cyprus, 5 April 2014). This delightful picture shows a spring adult Spotted Crake caught side by side with a Common Snipe. Here the former's true size can be properly appreciated. While it approaches the body size of the snipe, its more compact proportions make it look a much smaller bird. By comparison, Little and Baillon's Crakes are even smaller and would be dwarfed by a medium-sized wader such as Common Snipe.

Find your own Spotted, Little and Baillon's Crakes

SPOTTED Crake is a scarce breeding species – with about 80 widely scattered singing males – and passage migrant. Most birders are unlikely to find one for themselves, and its breeding sites are closely protected.

However, there are several areas that produce birds annually (though it is worth checking any local wetland in early autumn). These include Insh Marshes RSPB, Highland (NH 8103), Lower Derwent Valley NNR, Derbyshire (SE 6936), Nene Washes RSPB (TL 3199) and Ouse Washes RSPB (TL 4786), Cambridgeshire, Marazion RSPB, Cornwall (SW 5131) and Grove Ferry, Kent (TQ 2363).

As both are national rarities, birders are even less likely to stumble across **Little** or **Baillon's Crakes**. It is still worth checking any sizeable southern marsh for Little Crake, which has occurred multiple times in Norfolk, Devon and East Sussex. Baillon's Crake is even rarer, but also occurs mostly in southern England, with several records from Cornwall, Dorset, East Sussex, Kent, Norfolk and Somerset. ■



Quiz bird



HISTORY shows that, despite being reedbed denizens by nature, crakes can and do show up on even the smallest pond on occasion, so keeping an eye out for any rallid on your reedy local patch is a good idea.

With this in mind, you have seen a small crane-like bird peeking through the reeds on your morning circuit in spring. Is it the fairly common Water Rail (still a good 'patch bird' for many), or one of the more unusual species? Given your brief and partial views of the front end of the bird, is it that scarce passage migrant Spotted Crake on the way to its scattered breeding grounds, or either of the much rarer Little or Baillon's Crakes?

Use Andy Stoddart's ID tips on the previous pages to decide.

How to enter

Once you think you have the right answer, let us know the identity of the mystery crane in this photo. Go to bit.ly/bw274CrakeQuiz to enter, but be quick as the competition closes on 10 April. The answer will be available online at www.birdwatch.co.uk/win from 13 April, and the first randomly chosen reader with the correct answer will win a copy of *Advanced Bird ID Guide* by Nils Van Duivendijk. ■



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ANDREW PARKINSON (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

Saving the curlew



Eurasian Curlew was once a familiar sight and sound on Britain's wetlands, but worrying declines mean it is now Amber listed as a Bird of Conservation Concern. This is why RSPB Scotland has chosen it as this year's featured species for Scotland's Big Nature Festival. **Dan Brown** and **Louise Cullen** report.

What springs to mind when you think of Eurasian Curlew? Europe's largest wader, its improbably long bill, legs and neck lend it a graceful, elegant appearance. Its bubbling flight song, heard through the mists on a spring morning, is one of the most evocative sounds of the British countryside.

It certainly didn't fail to impress Scotland's National Bard, with Robert

Burns once writing: "I never heard the loud, solitary whistle of the curlew in a summer noon ... without feeling an elevation of soul." It is without doubt a well-known and much-loved species, but do we also consider it an iconic British bird of utmost importance from a world conservation perspective?

Britain is a global stronghold for Eurasian Curlew. With a breeding population estimated at 68,000 pairs,

we host perhaps as much as a quarter of the global breeding population. Similarly important numbers occur during the winter months, when British birds are joined by arrivals from Fennoscandia.

However, this large and important breeding population is under threat. The British Trust for Ornithology's (BTO) *Bird Atlas 2007-11* illustrates its disappearance from parts of south-

Musselburgh Lagoons (main photo) is the site of Scotland's Big Nature Festival in May. The area is a hot-spot for waders, including Eurasian Curlew (above) – the subject of this year's conservation project.



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west England and the Welsh uplands, while the situation is particularly dire across Ireland, where the breeding range has plummeted by a staggering 78 per cent in 40 years. Meanwhile, the Breeding Bird Survey reports a sharp and continuing decline of 43 per cent between 1995 and 2012.

Globally threatened

With further breeding declines documented across Europe, in 2008 Eurasian Curlew was uplisted to globally 'Near Threatened' on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Only three other birds that breed regularly in Britain are of global conservation concern. For two of these, Black-tailed Godwit and Dartford Warbler, Britain is 'edge of range' and supports a tiny proportion of their global populations; while these species are important from a national conservation perspective, Britain's role in international conservation efforts is minimal. The other species is Red Kite, a celebrated conservation success in Britain, with the population increasingly important when considered against declines elsewhere in Europe.

Eurasian Curlew is a starkly different matter due to the global importance of our breeding population and the current rate of decline. Efforts to safeguard British birds will go a long way to improving the species' global conservation status, and the curlew should now rightly be regarded as one of Britain's highest conservation priority bird species.

In recognition of this, RSPB Scotland has officially named Eurasian Curlew as the featured species for Scotland's Big

With 68,000 pairs, Britain holds up to a quarter of the global breeding population of Eurasian Curlew. Protecting these birds is a conservation priority for the RSPB.



ROGER WILMSHURST (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

Nature Festival 2015, which includes the Scottish Birdfair. All funds raised over the weekend will go towards conserving this spectacular wader. On both days there will be a talk on the curlew, explaining why it is a featured species for RSPB Scotland and the action that can be taken for population recovery.

Existing projects

The RSPB currently has several 'landscape-scale' conservation projects focused on the conservation and

monitoring of important populations of breeding waders. One such programme spans the upper catchment of the River Clyde, South Lanarkshire. Here, more than 35 farms are undertaking a variety of management measures designed to protect and enhance feeding and nesting habitats. Example conservation measures include creating beneficial sward conditions through grazing and cutting regimes, reducing livestock numbers within key 'breeding fields' to reduce nest trampling, and the creation



EMILY SCRAGG (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

Eurasian Curlew's nest is a simple shallow depression on the ground. The female lays between three and six eggs in April or May and incubates them for about a month.



EMILY SCRAGG (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

Lack of breeding success, with the species suffering high egg and chick mortality, could be one of many reasons behind major declines in Eurasian Curlew numbers across Britain.



Eurasian Curlew's status in the Republic of Ireland is especially dire; there may now be fewer than 100 breeding pairs.



of shallow wet feeding areas known as 'wader scrapes'.

A spring trip to some of these glens would leave the visitor in little doubt as to their importance. The mosaic of wetlands, damp pastures, grazed grasslands and moorland habitats – all underpinned by local farming practices – provide ideal conditions for waders. This is a special area where Eurasian Curlew, Oystercatcher, Northern Lapwing, Common Snipe and Common Redshank compete for your attention with a chorus of impressive flight songs and aerial acrobatics.

Maintaining the farming activities that create these habitats can put restrictions on the farmers, and financial support is available through agri-environment schemes. The RSPB's role is to work with farmers, estates, agents and local government departments to ensure that scarce agri-environment money goes to the right farms and fields. Without this additional income, farmers would consider other business interests, such as sward improvements or forestry, that would inevitably reduce the quality of breeding habitats for waders.

However, even in some of these wader hot-spots, regular surveys by the RSPB's dedicated band of volunteers have found that certain populations continue to decline, albeit at nowhere near the rate of national declines. But why, when so much targeted management is being undertaken?

Nest failure

One of the main reasons appears to be low breeding success, chiefly caused by high levels of nest and chick predation. The factors underlying high levels of predation are numerous and complex. The creation of new woodland, such as commercial conifer plantations, within otherwise 'open' landscapes leads to habitat fragmentation and results in increased predator activity in surrounding areas.

Predators may also enjoy better hunting success in landscapes associated with intensively managed grasslands; put simply, they can locate prey more easily in the simplified, homogenous swards. Furthermore, many avian and mammalian predator populations have recovered in recent years, following better legislative protection and a general decline in gamekeeping.

At the other end of the spectrum, a loss or reduction in farming activity can reduce the quality of wader feeding

Despite being a familiar sight in Britain's wetlands, Eurasian Curlew is declining across Britain and much of its core breeding range.



MIKE LANE (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

ERNIE JANES (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

With birds from Fennoscandia joining breeding numbers, Britain hosts one of the largest wintering populations of Eurasian Curlew in the world.



CHRIS KNIGHTS (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

and nesting habitat if rush and scrub are allowed to flourish. Finally, poorly understood but potentially of great importance is the possible impact that the huge numbers of non-native gamebirds released into the British countryside may have in supporting predators at unnaturally high densities.

Plans for the future

In many areas, Eurasian Curlew is migratory. Beyond the influx of birds we receive from Fennoscandia, large numbers of European breeding birds congregate at important wintering sites in the Wadden Sea and West Africa. As with all migratory species, international co-operation is crucial to conservation

efforts across the range.

Recognising Britain's international responsibility for the species, the RSPB recently developed an international conservation plan to co-ordinate action. The flyway plan is being developed under the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA), an intergovernmental treaty dedicated to the conservation of migratory waterbirds and their habitats across the flyway.

With the AEWA flyway plan nearing completion, the RSPB has recently committed to the initiation of a UK Curlew Recovery Programme. A key part of this is a trial management project starting this year. The project

will test whether the delivery of the optimum breeding habitat, in combination with measures to reduce nest and chick predation, is effective in recovering populations. In the short term at least, this will require controlling predator numbers, until longer-term, sustainable solutions to reducing predation in these landscapes are more fully understood.

The trial sites will be located across Britain, and if the combined package of trial management is successful in enhancing breeding success and numbers, attention will then turn to ensuring that this can be rolled out more widely across curlew breeding areas in years to come. ■



SCOTLAND'S BIG NATURE FESTIVAL 2015

THIS two-day event, now in its fourth year, will be held on 23 and 24 May at Musselburgh Lagoons, East Lothian (left). This location is a premier birding hot-spot, where an impressive array of waders, including Eurasian Curlew, can be seen.

The entire site was created on land claimed from the sea using pulverised fuel ash, a by-product of Cockenzie Power Station. It has been designated an SSSI and SPA site and is managed by East Lothian Council.

Scotland's Big Nature Festival, which is organised by RSPB Scotland, attracts more than 6,000 bird and wildlife enthusiasts. Some 100 exhibitors will showcase their latest wildlife products and there will be a variety of walks, talks, workshops, wildlife art, bird-ringing demos, optics, photography and locally sourced artisan foods, ales and whisky. Each day there will also be a talk on Eurasian Curlew, explaining why it is a featured species for RSPB Scotland and the action we can take for population recovery.

Ticket prices: adults £12 (RSPB, BTO and SOC members £10), children £2, under 5s free.

For more information on Scotland's Big Nature Festival and to buy tickets go to www.scottishbirdfair.org.uk. ■



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The fall and rise of a standard bearer



On the 30th anniversary of the White-tailed Eagle reintroduction scheme, RSPB Scotland's **Stuart Benn** relates the tale of the species' long but ultimately successful journey to reinstatement in the British avifauna.

IAN MCCARTHY (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)



Wouldn't it be fascinating if there were a whole series of *Bird Atlases* stretching back thousands of years? We would be able to chart the rise and fall of farmland birds or the changing fortunes of other species in response to long-term climate change. The maps for White-tailed Eagle would highlight the history of many of our top predators.

Bird Atlas 3000 BC would show thousands of pairs of 'sea eagles' right from the south coast of England to the north of Scotland, and they would have been living alongside Brown Bear, European Lynx and Wolf. Even into the medieval period, White-tailed Eagles would still have been well distributed and a common sight, but from then onwards habitat loss and persecution would have begun to take their toll. By the time we reach the 19th century, they would have been pushed back to the far north and west. This downward spiral continued until the last pair disappeared from Skye in 1916, though a lone female hung on in Shetland until 1918, when it was shot.

Roll on 60 years, and I can still remember buying the first *Breeding Bird Atlas* as a young lad in Glasgow, and poring over the maps, planning

where I could go to look for divers and Dotterel. However, I couldn't do that for White-tailed Eagle because, other than the odd bird wandering across from the Continent, there weren't any left in the period the *Atlas* covered. In those days, I had more chance of seeing a Thrush Nightingale in Britain than White-tailed Eagle. The species had gone the way of the Wolf.

Although I didn't know it, things were about to look up. Buried away on page 453 of that volume was a little

note saying that attempts were being made to reintroduce White-tailed Eagle on the Inner Hebrides. In 1975, the first birds had been brought in from Norway to the island of Rum – 'sea eagles' were native here and it was time they returned.

Over the next 10 years 82 White-tailed Eagles were released to form the nucleus of our current population, but despite the first successful nest occurring in 1985, it's been a long, slow haul. Such big birds produce few young,

Claire Smith, RSPB East Scotland Sea Eagle Project Officer, is shown here in August 2007 feeding the young eagles with Mackerel, though they were also given venison and Rabbit, as the species is more eclectic in its diet than is often thought. The birds' twice-daily ration was carefully weighed out and controlled.



ANDY HAY (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)



White-tailed Eagles often keep a lookout for prey from an elevated perch in a tree or on a rock, and despite being known colloquially as 'sea eagles', will eat mammals and carrion in addition to fish.



Breeding can take its toll quickly on the condition of adults, as the worn tail and flight feathers on this late spring adult show, as it stoops for fish.

and in the early years there were many more disappointments than causes for celebration, resulting in the necessity for some supplementary releases throughout the 1990s. Eventually, these birds – coupled with the growing number of wild-bred young – brought results, and the population began to climb and accelerate. The more recent *Atlases* have charted their progress: 25 pairs by 2002, 50 pairs by 2010, and the 100-pair landmark will be hit in 2015. Sea eagles are well and truly back!

First encounter

You never forget your first sighting of the species, and mine was in April 1986 on the Isle of Skye. I was performing seabird surveys, and walking along a stretch of coastal cliff-top when one sailed out from the cliff face underneath me. Nobody had told me that the birds were about and the experience was all the better for being so completely unexpected. I can still picture it now, with its huge broad wings and gleaming white tail, a step up from even Golden

Eagle in terms of bulk and presence.

As the birds increase and spread, many more people are now having their own first sightings and experiencing that thrill for themselves. Maybe they saw the Isle of Mull eagles on the BBC's *Springwatch* and decided to go up to the islands and make a holiday of it. For some, it's a one-off trip, but others catch the bug and are drawn back again and again. The numbers of visitors involved are quite incredible: it has been calculated that up to



A young White-tailed Eagle wears a leather falconer's hood as its GPS satellite transmitter is checked in August 2012. It was one of the last birds to be released as part of the Scottish reintroduction project.



A different juvenile has its wing tag checked in August 2012. A new project has now started in Ireland, modelled on the Fife example, though this has met with much opposition from local farmers.



Above left: adult White-tailed Eagles generally only call when near the nest, producing a vociferous and shrill *kleee kleee* sound.

Above right: this tagged juvenile White-tailed Eagle was perched in woodland near to the RSPB East Scotland Sea Eagle Project, soon after its release from the charity's aviary in August 2007. On release, the young birds chose to leave before first light, about 40 minutes after the cage door was opened, and then flew strongly away.

Below: an RSPB volunteer and airport staff offload a carrying case from a light aeroplane, containing a White-tailed Eagle intended for the species reintroduction programme in Scotland.



£5 million a year comes into the Mull economy as a direct result of people coming to watch sea eagles – a sizeable amount for such a remote island where other forms of economic activity are often limited. A thrilling spectacle and good for the local economy – what's not to like?

Actually, not everybody has welcomed the sea eagle's return with open arms. Reports of lamb-killing abound and this, coupled with the attitude in some quarters that "my forebears got rid of these birds for a reason and we don't want them back", has led to, at best, an uneasy stand-off, and at worst, illegal killing in some parts of western Scotland.

Eagles versus farmers

These are difficult issues to resolve. Two detailed studies have reported that lamb-killing does occur to a very limited degree, and the lambs in question were usually just about to die from other factors in any case. However, scientific reports which run counter to local firmly held views cut little ice among some, and are often ignored – claims and counter-claims still continue.

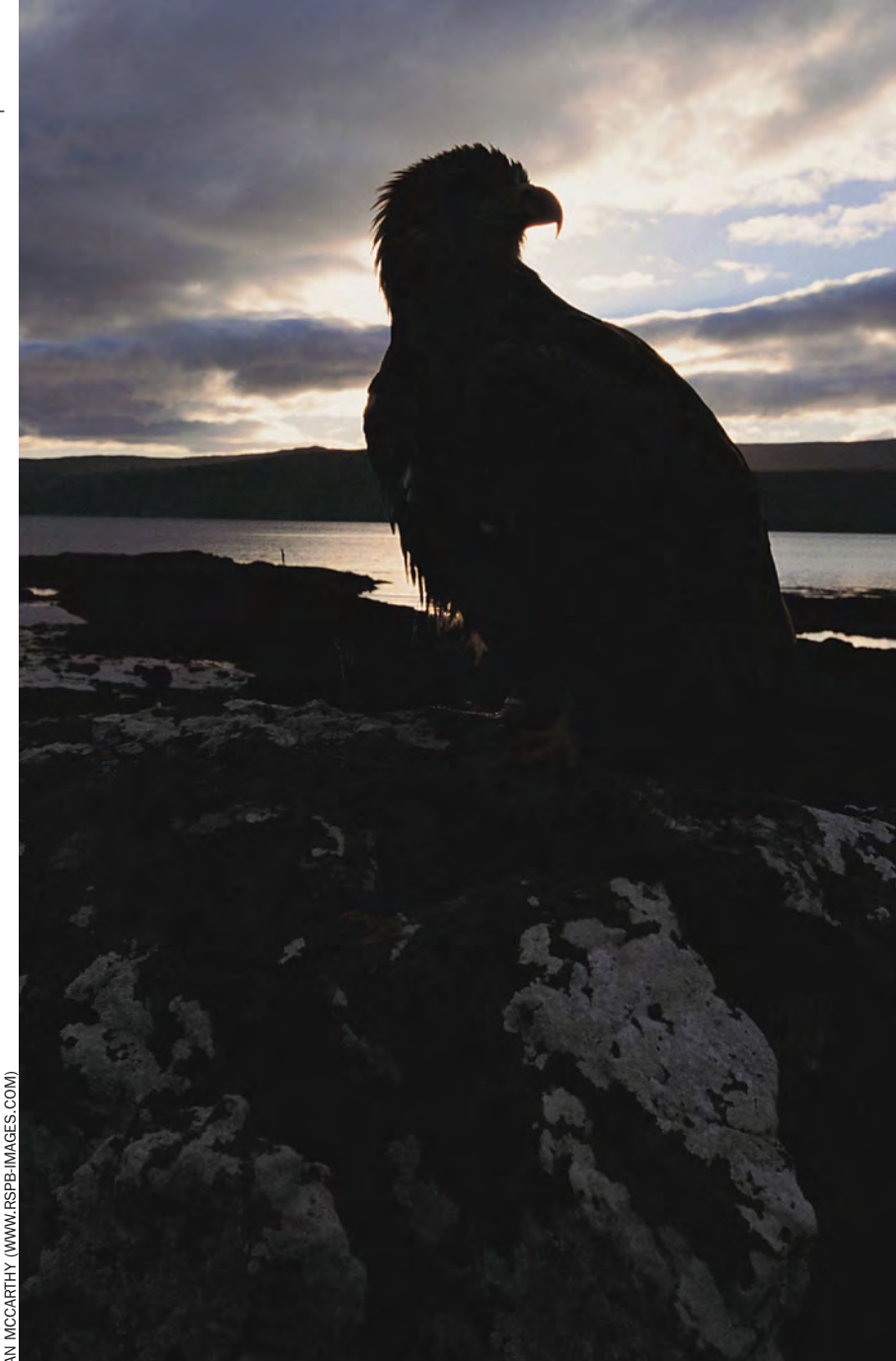
Still, it can't be impossible to resolve these problems, and the only sure way

to try is by solid evidence backed up with a lot of talking and even more listening. White-tailed Eagles are not going to go away this time, so people need to learn how to live alongside them, how to spread the benefits and how to deal with adverse issues in an honest and open way.

We can continue to learn how best to do this by seeing what happens in the many other parts of the world, where people still live among large predators and conflict resolution is often more advanced. We can apply those lessons to White-tailed Eagle, as well as bringing this thinking into conversations about other animals that were also killed off in Britain but which we might consider bringing back, such as European Lynx.

White-tailed Eagle was the first of the big modern reintroductions, and as such paved the way for Red Kite, Ospreys in England, and the current European Beaver trials. It showed that such projects can work, and that wildlife declines and loss aren't inevitable – we can set this right, too. The species' reintroduction has had an importance well beyond the overall success of the project itself.

The White-tailed Eagle reintroduction has also opened our eyes to the possible



IAN MCCARTHY (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

The RSPB considers the White-tailed Eagle reintroduction a resounding success. However, moves to begin a further scheme in Suffolk, where much suitable habitat exists, met with concerted and – the RSPB believes – politically motivated opposition.

areas where wildlife can live. The last of Britain's original White-tailed Eagles were found in the farthest-flung parts of north and west Scotland, and inevitably people thought that the habitats there were the species' preferred habitat – hence this being the site of reintroduction in the 1970s. On the Continent, however, White-tailed Eagle actually do better in lowland areas, so our most recent reintroduction has been to the farmland, woodlands and estuaries of the east coast of Scotland.

While it may fit our romantic image to think of a White-tailed Eagle soaring above the surf crashing onto an Atlantic headland, the bird will quite happily scavenge a dead Rabbit on the edge of a wheat field in the lowlands. A decade ago plans to reintroduce sea eagles to Suffolk ran into concerted opposition, but wildlife can live in what we think of as the most unexpected places if we allow it to happen.

So, what of the future? Sea eagles will hopefully eventually repopulate the whole of Britain, perhaps by further reintroductions, but if not they'll get there by themselves from Scotland or from the rapidly increasing populations on the near Continent. Although I won't be around to see this, by the time of *Bird Atlas 2100*, there's every chance that sea eagles will be getting back to something like their prehistoric numbers and distribution, and maybe – just maybe – living alongside European Lynx too! ■

For more information about White-tailed Eagle and where to go and see the species, visit www.rspb.org.uk.

STUART HOUSDEN ON SEA EAGLES

STUART Housden is the Director of RSPB Scotland, and has been intimately involved with the White-tailed Eagle reintroduction scheme for many years. Here he talks to *David Callahan* now that the project has drawn to a close.

Does the RSPB consider the population to be self-sustaining?

"There are now four pairs on the east coast of Scotland after the first successful breeding on the mainland in 2009, and these are mixed pairs – some involve known tagged western Scottish individuals intermixing with released east coast birds. So, yes, we consider that the now-extensive west coast range and the joining of the range on both coasts to be a good indicator that the population is self-sustaining. There are around 98 occupied territories in the west, including on the Argyll mainland, and birds now winter on the Solway. The birds fledge an average of around 0.7 chicks per nest, which is a good rate of survival [the species typically produces two eggs per nest]."

How have you got around the birds becoming habituated to humans?

"We've learnt a lot since the project began in 1975, and the eagles have become much less like falconer's birds – towards the end of the project, they barely ever

saw a human being. This has probably helped the increased rate of survival."

How have you managed to overcome the prejudices of the farming community regarding the birds' potential to kill lambs?

"For background, there is a large and popular farming press in Scotland, and there have a lot of headlines regarding White-tailed Eagles being seen hanging around lambing parks. However, two official studies have now shown that the eagles are more likely to be drawn to adjacent already-dead lambs or discarded afterbirth. I'm not saying that the eagles take no lambs at all, but deaths from illness, being underweight and hypothermia are much more frequent. White-tailed Eagle is the top scavenger on Mull, which has no Foxes, and will be attracted to any carrion."

Why did the mooted and publicly announced reintroduction to Suffolk not go ahead in the end?

"Well, the politics of the situation got out of hand. The shooting community effectively ganged up to make the scheme impossible. There was a level of co-ordinated attack that indicated some kind of political control. However, with birds now breeding in The Netherlands and the meeting of the Scottish populations, I suspect that breeding will take place on the Solway in the next five or 10 years. After that, who knows?" ■



The twitcher diaries

June

13 Wednesday

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LITTLE BITTERN seen this morning
POTTERIC CARR - S. YORKS OFF M18

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- NANQUIDNO VALLEY CORNWALL
- been there 3 DAYS - seen this morning



Richard MILLINGTON B.A.H.S.

June

F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19

"Anything about?" In the days before bird news went digital, those familiar words were uttered thousands of times by callers to that famous hub of information on the Norfolk coast, Nancy's Café in Cley. **Moss Taylor** reminisces.

Many will have fond memories of Nancy's Café. Before the advent of birdlines, pagers and the internet, it was one of just a few ways for birders not on a local 'grapevine' to obtain up-to-date information on local and national rarities. Sitting near the phone in Nancy's, having a quiet cup of coffee and a bun was simply not an option, as that phone would ring continuously as birders from all parts of Britain called to get the latest 'gen'.

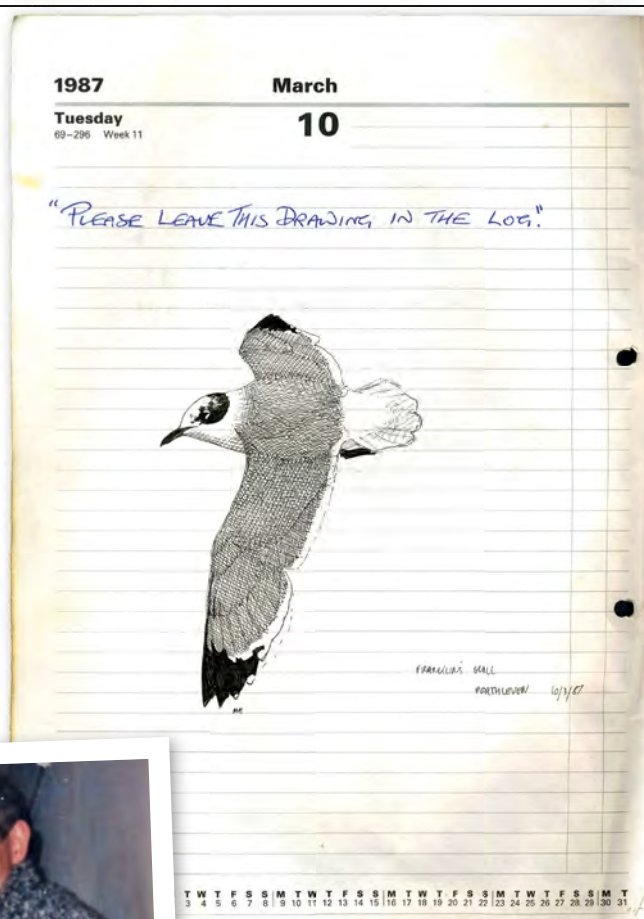
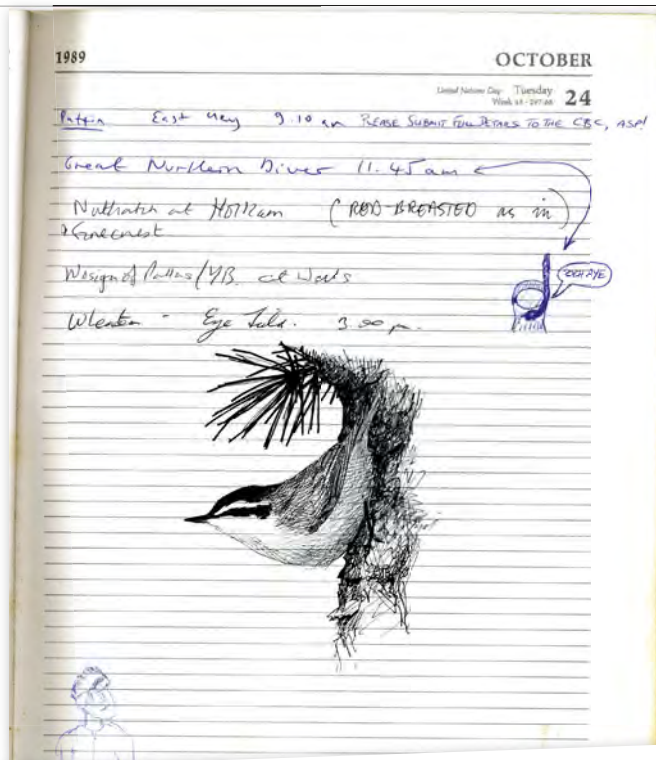
Open all hours

Traditionally, Nancy's closed at the end of October and was only open at weekends during the winter months, before reopening full time at Easter. Despite this, she still received frequent phone calls on weekdays throughout winter from birders seeking information.



Above: several of Richard Millington's sketches appeared in the pages of the diaries, like this Little Bittern at South Potteric Carr, South Yorkshire, in June 1984. It was the male of the first pair proved to breed in Britain.

Right: Nancy Gull outside her café, which for 14 years was the epicentre of bird news in Britain.



Above left: lots of artists portrayed the Red-breasted Nuthatch at Holkham, Norfolk, in October 1989, including Martin Elliott. This page also includes a comment from the infamous CRC, or Cley Rarities Committee.

Above right: Martin Elliott's excellent sketch of a Franklin's Gull at Porthleven, Cornwall, graced the page of 10 March 1987.

Left: Mark Wickens (left) settles the bill with Nancy Gull (centre), while two unknown café patrons look on.

Nancy was remarkably tolerant of this intrusion into her private life.

In August 1975, a hard-backed notebook was placed in Nancy's to be used as a diary, in which birds of interest seen in Norfolk could be recorded for the benefit of other birders and the county recorders, a tradition that continued without a break until the café closed in 1988. On moving from Cley to Sheringham, Jack and Nancy Gull, in whose house the café was situated, registered as patients at my surgery, and Nancy subsequently gave me the diaries, instead of simply throwing them away. Since then they have remained on a shelf in my study, gathering dust, so it is a pleasure to share them again with the present generation of birders.

The first few entries in the 1975 diary were all written by 'JTC' (Tommy

Corcoran) and relate to his sightings on Arnold's Marsh and from the Bittern Hide (how many of you can remember that particular hide?). Further down the page, a walk from Cley to Blakeney Point on 10 August 1975 produced more than 20 Pied Flycatchers and two Icterine Warblers, as recorded by DJH (Dave Holman), SCJ (Steve Joyner), NW (Norman Williams) and others. By the third page, records from Wells and even a Buff-breasted Sandpiper at Walberswick, Suffolk, were included, and thereafter anything of note in East Anglia and further afield was added.

Many other now well-known names in the birding world also recorded their observations in the initial pages, including John Marchant, Bill Sutherland and Chris Durdin (these last two both in the University of East Anglia Bird Club), Tony Marshall (a

frequent visitor to the north Norfolk coast from Essex), Chris Heard and Dudley Isles, to name but a few.

Comment and criticism

Almost inevitably, written records of bird sightings attract comments from other observers who may question their authenticity, and Nancy's diaries were no exception. The first appeared on 14 October, during a then unprecedented arrival of Yellow-browed Warblers. One observer noted a Pallas's Warbler and two Yellow-browed Warblers at Wells, followed in parenthesis by "some of the big boys saw 8 or more!", while a Cetti's Warbler at Walsey Hills in late October was considered "not likely". How things have changed!

However, as time passed comments began to get more barbed, but were occasionally amusing. For example, the

13th June. Little Stint, Spotted Redshank - Simmonds Scrape.

13 Little Gulls - Eye Pool.

Spoonbills Little Egret - still present.

14th June 1 Rock Sparrow along beach/fence at Eye Field. SJMG RCM. MIE, CDRJ. x (Cuddy, nearly) GRIPPERS (C) R. "TELEVISION Repair Man"

NORFOLK
TOP AGAIN
NUMBERS UNO

GRIP GRIP
NAC.

IT'S NOT FAIR
ETM.

To be person who took
the Great Red Pic
This one no use to you!

It's an ugly bastard
I didn't want to see
it anyway
Just as if!



LITTLE EGRET STILL AT QUAGGS.

ONE SPOONBILL STILL PRESENT. SJMG RCM.

OF SCAMP ON SHOPE'S POOL. % for spelling.

PHONE CALL: - KELLING AVERIES MATS JUST
LOST A SMALL BROWNISH BIRD WITH A CROWN
STRIKE AND WORN ON ROOST. I WONDER
WHAT IT COULD BE. ASK TUCKER & RICH - THEY
MIGHT KNOW. I wonder if the vain attempts
at sabotaging are a direct result of chipping? % for effort



Above: birder Rob Aberdeen mans the phone outside the café, accompanied by Nancy's husband Jack.

Left: Britain's only Rock Sparrow, at Cley, Norfolk, on 14 June 1981, was sketched for posterity by Richard Millington. The page also contains some good examples of the kind of amusing comments the diaries attracted.

entry for 2 November reads: "Lesser Grey Shrike & Short-toed Lark [at] Holme (take care to avoid minefield, barbed wire & machine gun post - the natives are hostile)."

Some records are of momentous sightings in the history of Norfolk (and British) ornithology, such as the Zitting Cisticola (known as Fan-tailed Warbler at the time) seen only by Nick Dymond as it sang and displayed by the East Bank at Cley before flying purposefully west at 7.30 am on 24 August 1976, much to the chagrin of local observers. However, what was presumably the same bird was relocated at Holme five days later, where it continued to perform for the next 48 hours.

In 1977, many more now familiar names began to appear in the diary, including one on 29 May by SJMG (Steve Gantlett, otherwise known as Captain Ticker), recording both Red-throated Pipit and Blue-headed Wagtail at Kelling Quags, while Eddie Myers's first entry was of a Red-backed Shrike, no fewer than eight Icterine Warblers and a selection of other autumn migrants on Blakeney Point on 7 August. The very sad news of Richard Richardson's death was included on 9 October, although strangely enough the entry read "Dick passed away today", a name that he was

known by to very few of his friends.

The adjudication of records by the self-appointed Cley Rarities Committee (CRC) first appeared following a sighting of a Black Kite over Cley Road at Holt on 5 November, with the comment: "Cley Rarities Committee finds this record totally unacceptable as the possibility of an escape cannot be ruled out and the veracity of the observer has been seriously questioned. However, the committee will reconsider if they see the bird in question." Thereafter, the words "CRC rejected" appeared regularly in the diaries, in writing that looks suspiciously like that of SJMG.

On 28 May 1978, the infamous first-summer male Pied Wheatear (a new bird for the county) was found by Peter Allard at Winterton. For reasons which I never really understood, the record was suppressed and its arrival was passed on to only a few Norfolk birders, myself included, although I was unable to travel to Winterton to see it. By the following morning it had moved on, much to the annoyance of those who had failed to see it the previous day.

A few days later, it became common knowledge and of those who had seen it, Dave Holman was particularly singled out as a 'conspirator', and the CRC made the following comments in Nancy's diary: "Cley Records Committee herewith rejects DJ Holman (ex-twitcher) for

anti-social activities ie gross suppression" and "As of this date anyone passing on information or in any way co-operating with P Feakes, DJ Holman or N Williams will render themselves liable for trial and sentence by the Cley Rarities Committee".

In an attempt to deflect blame away from Dave Holman, Peter Allard on one of his infrequent visits to Cley wrote in the diary: "Dave Holman was in no way responsible for the suppression of the male Pied Wheatear - East Coast Suppression Ltd." Nevertheless, Dave was not allowed to forget about it for many years. Twitchers who 'dip out' on rare birds have very long memories.

Artistic licence

Although the first sketch (of a Greenish Warbler at Holme) appeared in early September 1976, it was not until July 1980 that the first of Richard Millington's excellent line drawings in biro graced the pages of the diaries. Thereafter, many of the rarities that turned up at Cley were recorded for posterity in this way. Undoubtedly the most important was a fine sketch of Britain's only Rock Sparrow, found by Steve Gantlett and Richard Millington along the beach fence on the Eye Field in the early morning of 14 June 1981, and seen by only three other observers. This diary page is also a good



The cafe's fame spread when an article appeared in the *Sunday Express Magazine* on 4 October 1987. This photo of Eddie Myers watched by Nancy appeared in the article and was stuck into the pages of the diary.

example of the sorts of comments that were prevalent at the time.

Occasionally Richard's sketches were executed in coloured crayons. Later diaries were also enlivened by the accurate drawings of Martin Elliott, who worked as an assistant warden at the Cley reserve and often portrayed rarities from other parts of the country, such as the long-staying second-winter Franklin's Gull at Porthleven, Cornwall, in 1987.

From the comments next to many of the sketches, there was clearly some artistic rivalry between him and Richard Millington, and it was not surprising that some of these drawings were removed from the diaries as trophies. Eddie Myers was obviously concerned about this and above the Franklin's Gull had written: "Please leave this drawing in the log".

For more than six months from October 1989, Norfolk hosted yet another British first in the form of a Red-breasted Nuthatch at Holkham that was portrayed by a variety of talented artists in the pages of Nancy's diaries. It favoured the area around the royal family's summer house, where it often gave "crippling views".

Relevant (and sometimes irrelevant) newspaper cuttings began to appear in the diaries from the mid-1980s, including one of me in the stocks at Sheringham Carnival with Eddie Myers's comment:

"It's what he deserves for suppressing the Alpine Accentor," a reference to one found and ringed by Kevin Shepherd near Dead Man's Wood nine years earlier. Someone else had written: "Hang the bastard." What it is to be popular!

Fame and infamy

The fame of Nancy's Café spread even further when an article about it appeared in the *Sunday Express Magazine* of October 1987, with a photo of Eddie Myers answering the phone watched over by Nancy. The article began "Nancy Gull, proprietress of Nancy's Café, has got used to the sight of her customers suddenly leaping to their feet and making a dash for the nearest exit without even pausing to pay their bills."

Perhaps the most amusing entries relate to an unfortunate incident involving Tommy Corcoran, who along with Eddie Myers was one of the most regular contributors to the diaries from the very first one to the last in 1989 (when for a final year the diary resided at the nearby Beach Café). In early May 1987 Tommy decided to visit East Hills off Wells to look for migrants, hoping to find a Tawny Pipit. At high tide, East Hills is an island but as the water recedes it is possible, with care, to wade across the channels and reach this isolated area of pines and



Richard Millington's drawing of the Black-and-white Warbler at How Hill, near Ludham, Norfolk, in December 1985 was accompanied by a photo of the bird taped to the page for 5th.

scrub. Unfortunately, while attempting to cross one of the channels, Tommy lost his footing and fell into the water, losing his Hertel & Reuss telescope in the process, and nearly drowning.

The diary entry for 8 May reads: "Tawny Corcoran. Pelagic Tours off Norfolk. In search of the underwater scope." Two days later, diary sketches illustrated "Tommy Corcoran Birding Equipment" and included flippers, safety flares, snorkel, wet suit, periscope, water wings and spare clothing, while a week later a hand-drawn map appeared entitled "Where not to watch birds in Norfolk (at high tide) by Tommy Corcoran". This light-hearted banter continued until the end of the month, although Tommy did have the last laugh, when a Tawny Pipit was indeed found at East Hills on 26 May.

It was with great sadness that Nancy closed her café for good at the end of 1988, and the final entry in that year's diary was of a Sooty Shearwater flying east off Blakeney Point on 30 December, recorded by Phil Heath and Andy Stoddart. So ended an era at Cley.

Just think how much Norfolk birding folklore would have been lost if Nancy had simply thrown away the diaries, as she had intended. It just goes to show how important it is to retain written records and accounts from years gone by. ■



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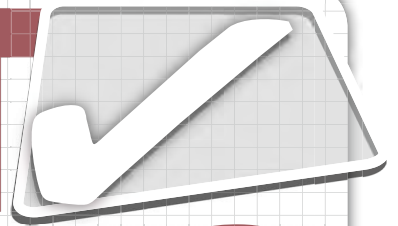
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Pocket monster

Although not promoted as a travelscope, Celestron's 60 mm Landscout still fits the bill for lightness, compactness and portability, concludes **Mike Alibone**.

REVIEW

Celestron Landscout 12-36x60 telescope

IT'S not widely advertised as a travelscope but that's essentially what this new offering from Celestron is. Moreover, with a 60 mm objective, its light-gathering capacity is potentially greater than the handful of conventional 50 mm 'mini' scopes currently available in today's market.

Picking it up for the first time I was amazed at how light it is: a featherweight 513 g, putting it well below the average weight of an 8x42 binocular. This can be attributed to a combination of a lightweight polycarbonate body covered with the thinnest of layers of hard rubber.

This is a 'no frills' telescope. The objective lens housing is protected by a softer rubber than that used to cover the body and, although it has the appearance of a lens hood, it is actually part of the body, so does not extend. The lens is deeply recessed, however, and this offers some protection

from potential damage and adverse weather, and it is likely to reduce glare to some extent.

There is a full, 360-degree rotating tripod mount which is lockable in any position. However, the tripod foot does not have an anti-rotation pin port to lessen the potential for the scope twisting and ultimately working loose.

Immediately adjacent to, and behind, the tripod mount is the rubber-covered and shallowly



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This month's subject is the ubiquitous Woodpigeon – the challenge is to make it interesting!

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Steve Young puts Sigma's new zoom lens through its paces.

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This new account seeks to cover all of Iberia's birds – how well does it succeed?

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A revised edition of a groundbreaking combination of sound recordings and bird guide.

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Stunning photography captures the seasonal delights of this Hong Kong wader hot-spot.

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A new guide to the moths of Britain and Ireland represents an attempt to cover all species recorded in the countries.

THIS MONTH'S EXPERT PANEL



DOMINIC MITCHELL is *Birdwatch*'s founder and Managing Editor. He has been birding in Britain and abroad for more than 40 years.



MIKE ALIBONE is *Birdwatch*'s Optics Editor. He has been testing binoculars and telescopes for more than a decade.



DAVID CALLAHAN Prior to joining *Birdwatch*, David trained as a taxonomist at the Natural History Museum.



STEVE YOUNG is Photographic Consultant for *Birdwatch* and an award-winning wildlife photographer.



RAY TIPPER is a birder, tour guide and wildlife photographer. Now based in Portugal, he previously lived in Hong Kong.



NEIL BOWMAN Norfolk photographer Neil is as enthusiastic about dragonflies and lepidoptera as he is birds.

? Did you know?

THE colour contrast within an image is related to the 'resolving power' of the optics, in which a higher resolution (fine detail) results in higher contrast. While larger objectives deliver higher levels of resolution, contrast can also be dependent on quality of optical coatings and the quality of the glass used in lenses and the prism system.

milled integral focusing wheel. Although broad enough, it offers too much turning resistance for my liking, requiring combined thumb and forefinger operation instead of just a single finger operation.

Apart from the model's compactness, one of its most significant attributes is its ability to be hand-held, which is something I did on several occasions as it is so light, well balanced and easy to hold steady. Remember, if you are using an 8x

magnification binocular then this scope will deliver 4.5x that figure without the need for a tripod.

The eyepiece is an integral part of the scope and it's not interchangeable. Using thumb and forefinger, rotating it clockwise through less than 90 degrees results in a very quick zoom from 12x to 36x magnification. There are, however, two points to bear in mind during use. Firstly, there is no folding or extendable eye-cup, so your eye

is very close to the lens during normal viewing. This may not suit some users, but I didn't find it uncomfortable at all. Secondly, the whole eyepiece rotates during zooming, which means you will have to move your eye away slightly when operating it to avoid discomfort. Neither point is a major issue and they are no doubt reflective of the entry-level cost of the product.

With the latter in mind, the image quality is really quite commendable. It's bright and has a warm tone. The colours reflect reality, but I found the levels of contrast a little on the low side. This became particularly apparent when watching Cormorants on one of my local gravel pits. The brown hues of mantle and covert feathers were evident, but they

did not stand out to the expected degree against the darker tones of other parts of the birds' plumage. With the same birds backlit against the reflective water there was also a modicum of chromatic aberration in the centre of the image, although in other lighting conditions this was far less noticeable.

Otherwise, the image is reasonably sharp, losing a little definition toward the edges of the field. Taking the product price into consideration, the overall result is pleasing.

If you are considering purchasing a highly portable, lightweight and compact telescope on a tight budget, then the Landscout 12-36x60 appears to represent a worthy, value-for-money option. It is a budget 'scope of convenience' to throw into your pocket or backpack on a family holiday or to keep in your car's glove compartment, ready for rapid deployment when necessary. Accessories included in the package include a 'tabletop' tripod and soft carry case. ■

“I was amazed at how light it is: a featherweight 513 g, well below the weight of an 8x42 binocular”



Further info

- **Price:** £120
- **Size:** 273x130 mm
- **Weight:** 513 g
- **Magnification:** 12-36x
- **Field of view:** 52-28 m at 1,000 m
- **Light transmission:** not available
- **Close focus:** 10 m
- **Gas-filled:** no
- **Waterproof:** weatherproof only
- **Guarantee:** limited lifetime

Verdict

- ✓ Very light and compact model that is easy to hand-hold
- ✓ Image is bright with realistic colours
- ✗ Levels of contrast are a little on the low side

STEVE YOUNG'S PHOTO CHALLENGE

Woodpigeon



THIS month I'm choosing a very familiar species as the subject of the photo challenge: Woodpigeon. These days this is an easy bird to see and photograph, being common in parks and gardens, but it wasn't always so.

When I started photography I can clearly remember struggling to take decent shots of Woodpigeons, and they were unheard of in my parent's garden, so it is only relatively recently that the species has become 'urbanised' – at least where I live – to such an extent that many photographers hardly give it a second glance.

But it is up to the *Birdwatch* photographers to not only give it a second glance, but a third and a fourth one, until you have a photo that will stand out from the rest. You might want to try for a difficult flight shot or go for a real close-up. If you have a garden with regular Woodpigeons then this is a great chance to use your imagination to take something different.

Email your best candidates to editorial@birdwatch.co.uk. The winning photographer will receive a copy of *Bill Oddie Unplucked*. I look forward to seeing the entries – good luck!

• Turn to page 93 to find out who won February's challenge.

Left: Woodpigeons are very common, so achieving a shot that stands out from the crowd is the challenge. The species can be very approachable, so it lends itself perfectly to close-up portraits.

Below: good images of birds in flight are always tricky to attain. Try practising on Woodpigeons in a local park or even in your garden.



A very good Sport

REVIEW

Sigma 150-600 mm f5-6.3 DG OS HSM Sport lens



SIGMA has a deserved reputation for providing good-quality lenses at reasonable prices. At the other end of the scale, the company also manufactures high-end lenses that are of professional standard, and this latest 150-600 mm model fits into that category.

The product sits in the new line-up of Sigma's 'Sport' lenses; it features an updated optical stabilisation (OS) system. On the side of the model is a new zoom lock switch, which can be locked at any marked focal length, and a new manual override (MO), which is activated by rotating the focus ring while using autofocus (AF). Closest focus is 2.6 m, and with a water and oil repellent coating on the front and rear glass elements, it seems to be ideal for bird photography.

The metal construction means it is quite a heavy lens, but the build quality feels and looks superb. The zoom works the opposite way to my own lens, but as the Sigma also has a 'push and pull' option that wasn't going to be a problem.

A few early trial shots in the garden with my friendly Robin looked promising, but I wanted to give it a proper field test, and with a Laughing Gull only a short journey away through the Mersey Tunnel at New Brighton, it seemed almost rude not to visit and treat the lens and myself to a day out. I used the model as I imagine most bird photographers will: hand-holding and at the 600 mm setting for a lot of the time. However, I also tried other settings, used the new 1.4x Sigma converter and tested it on a tripod and with a beanbag.

It was a dull, grey day when I arrived on the Wirral. In a way this is better for a test, though, as many lenses that perform well in good light struggle when the

light is poor. The Laughing Gull was sitting on the railings of the marina when I got there, allowing for a nice series of comparison shots at different zoom settings. A few flight shots followed, and although the light was dull the AF locked onto the flying bird quietly and easily.

On a second visit on a sunny day, I managed a nice flight series of Mediterranean Gull, the zoom being ideal for pulling back when the gull came too close for use at the higher end of the range. My final test was on some Snow Buntings that were just down the road at Wallasey. Hand-holding and shooting at 600 mm for individual portraits, I was very happy with the results. Using the lower end of the focal range meant I could also take a few shots of all four birds, although frustratingly one always stayed too far back to be in focus even when shooting at f11.

Sigma has also introduced a new 1.4x converter (the TC1401, which retails at £259). I tested this out at my local patch. This gives the lens a focal range of 210-840 mm and makes it a bit more difficult to use. The aperture at the maximum zoom becomes f9, so the AF is not as quick and 'hunts' slightly for the subject. Camera shake is also more evident and I rested the lens on a beanbag for some shots of Little Grebe.

Looking at the images in detail on a computer screen, I was very impressed. Sharpness was excellent, as were both colour and contrast. The OS works well and even my Laughing Gull shots taken at 600 mm hand-held while shooting at just 1/320th sec had more sharp ones among them than blurred efforts.

It is a heavy lens and my arm and wrist did get a bit tired after a

while, so a tripod or beanbag will help. The push-pull option on the lens was a bonus when needing to zoom quickly with flying birds. The model also claims to be dust and splash proof. I didn't get it wet, but on the beach with the Snow Buntings I had no problems with sand, despite it being a windy day.

The lens covers the high end of focal lengths compared to those available from the camera manufacturers themselves which are usually around the 80-400 mm length. It retails at £1,599.99,

but can be found cheaper, and is of superb quality. It adds to the choices available for those wanting to start bird photography and is a quality product from a well-established manufacturer.

A word of warning: be careful when looking for this lens if you are thinking of buying one. There are two versions available: the Sports (S) model and a Contemporary (C) version, which is made from polycarbonate. The latter is lighter, optically different and sells for a lower price; this test is for the Sports model. **Steve Young**



Top: a dull day at New Brighton, Cheshire, provided the opportunity to really test the lens on this Laughing Gull. This photo was taken at the lowest focal length, showing the bird in context. Despite the poor lighting, the image is bright with good colours. **150 mm, 1/500th sec, f5.**

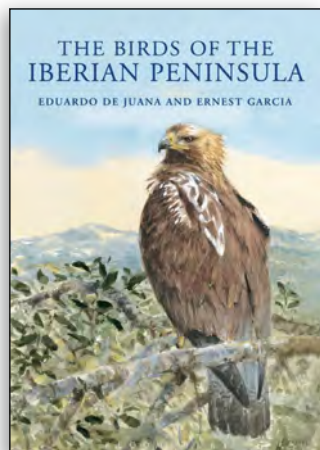
Above: hand-held and taken at the 600 mm setting, this image of a Snow Bunting at Wallasey, Cheshire, is very sharp. **600 mm, 1/1,600th sec, f8.**



More info

Price: £1,599.99 • **Focal length:** 150-600 mm • **Diameter:** 121 mm • **Length:** 290 mm • **Weight:** 2,860 g • **Close focus:** 2.6 m • **Mounts available:** Sigma, Nikon, Canon

Iberia's birds in impressive detail



THE Iberian peninsula is acknowledged as having one of Europe's richest avifaunas. The combination of relative proximity and low travel costs means that many British birders, enticed by the promise of an exciting array of primarily Mediterranean species, will have visited at some time or another.

Spain dominates Iberia in terms of area and also birding appeal, but Portugal, Gibraltar and Andorra all boast their own avian attractions, too. News to me from this much-anticipated account of the region's avifauna was that France also has a toehold presence in the peninsula, courtesy of the 210-square-mile region of Cerdagne, which falls on the southern side of the Pyrenean watershed, and which itself contains the tiny Spanish enclave of Llívia. All these political entities are here treated together with their associated offshore islands – the Balearics, Cies, Columbretes and Alboran in the case of Spain, and the Berlengas for Portugal – in this first modern English-language account of Iberian birds.

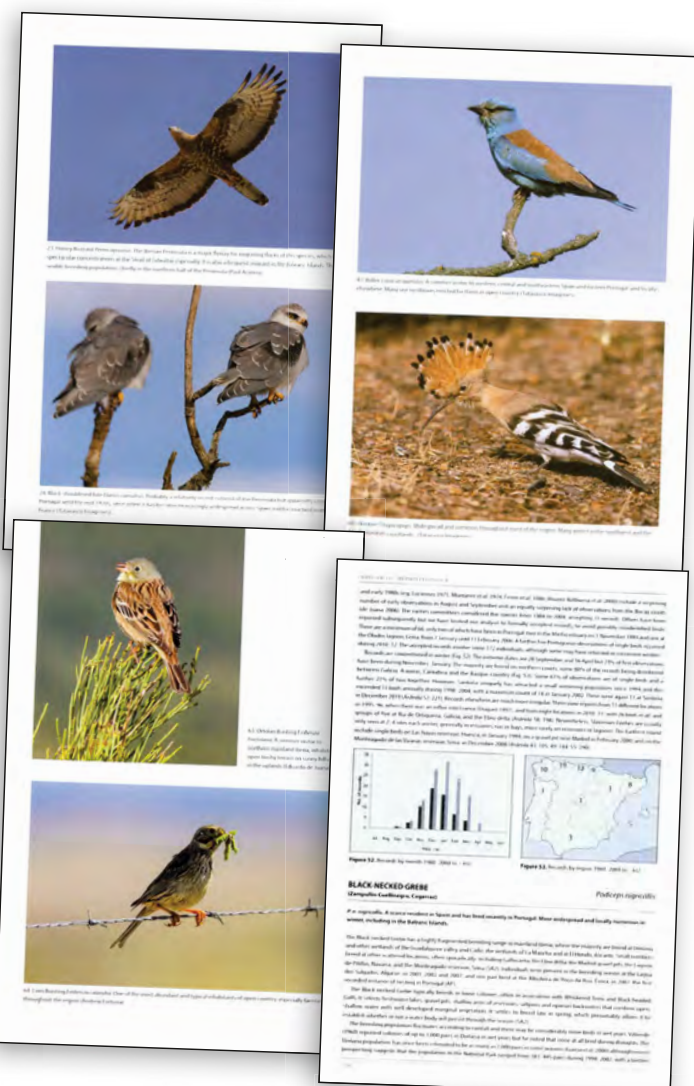
The relatively brief but informative introductory section covers geography and climate, habitats and the Iberian avifauna, and also contains the 32-page collection of photos. The first 16 of these beautifully encapsulate the region's landscapes and habitat diversity, while the remaining 48 depict a range of keynote bird species. Most are excellent, with the bathing Red-knobbed Coot a personal favourite. A few look a little 'old', however, and could perhaps have been improved upon.

An opportunity has also been missed to photographically showcase Balearic Warbler, one of only four bird species endemic to the region (all of which, incidentally, are a result of 'splits'). The other three – Balearic Shearwater, Spanish Imperial Eagle and Iberian Azure-winged Magpie – are all featured in photos, while an attractive painting of the eagle also adorns the dustjacket.

At 557 pages, the main systematic list comprises more than 80 per cent of the book. Each species account begins with details of subspecies and breeding and/or status summaries, and continues with concisely written yet detailed and fact-filled narratives for all regular breeding, wintering and migrant species. Sometimes these are quite lengthy, for example extending for more than two pages for Common Crane, Kentish Plover and Bluethroat, but a page or so is more typical. The level of detail is excellent and the informative text repays close reading, with countless illuminating facts and background.

Full details of vagrants are given and occurrence patterns analysed. Data includes all accepted records to the end of 2010 for Portugal and 2011 for Gibraltar and Spain, with a few later records still under assessment included for completeness. I like the context given for vagrancy occurrences, with totals of accepted records often also quoted for Britain, Ireland, France and Morocco. In a handful of instances, however, there seemed to be some confusion about status; for example, the sole quoted Wandering Albatross record, from Portuguese waters, is not (currently) considered fully acceptable (*Anuario Ornitológico* 5: 127), and similarly Moroccan records of Marabou Stork cited in support of Spanish occurrences are also not accepted (Patrick Bergier *in litt*).

The short species entry for Bateleur, which is based entirely on a pending report from 5 April 2012, might have better been included in the interim in an appendix rather than the full systematic list, while mention that the nominate *petrosus* subspecies of Rock Pipit "may



also occur as a scarce winter visitor" seems optimistic based on the lack of any evidence and the fact that this rather sedentary form is effectively impossible to separate from migratory *littoralis* in the field in non-breeding plumage.

It's always possible to find such minor discrepancies in a tome as expansive as this, but they in no way detract from what is overall an excellent and comprehensive account of Iberia's birdlife. If you've ever been to this biodiverse corner of south-west Europe you'll surely want a copy; if you haven't, then this book is all the inspiration you'll need.

Dominic Mitchell

More info

- *The Birds of the Iberian Peninsula* by Eduardo de Juana and Ernest Garcia (Christopher Helm, London, 2015).
- 688 pages, 64 colour photos, numerous distribution maps and tables.
- ISBN 9871408124802. Hbk, £60.

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The song remains the same



THIS year's *Birdsong* is a revised edition of 2012's groundbreaking but slightly disappointing combination of recordings and bird guide in hardback format.

However, as it retains the same number of recordings and only increases the illustrations by single figures, while reducing the volume size, number of pages and price, the problems with the previous edition remain. With easily available free online sources for bird songs and

calls, and excellent field guides readily available for the birds of Britain and Ireland, it is difficult to see where the market for this guide exists. There are too many species for it to be a garden bird manual, and nowhere near enough to help you identify all the commonly occurring species in the designated region.

In fact, the same species that I highlighted in my previous review (see *Birdwatch* 238: 64) are still missing (White-fronted Goose, Hobby, Spotted Flycatcher and so on). One has to conclude that this is not so much a revision as merely a cost-saving exercise.

This is a shame, because the habits- and behaviour-orientated text by Jonathan Elphick is very well written (as you might expect), and the bird expertise on hand from the other co-authors is also top notch. The recordings themselves are decent, and the 'press and listen' section of the

book easy to use. However, many of the passerines have just one example of their song included, no matter how variable their vocalisations.

As before, it is best used to learn bird sounds at home, still being too bulky to use comfortably in the field and with little identification information. Even so, your time may be better spent perusing the *Collins Bird Guide* and playing back calls and songs from Xeno Canto, where the quality and variety of recordings far exceeds this volume. If you have even a limited grasp of bird identification, you might even be better off simply getting out into the field



and teaching yourself bird sounds from your own observations. While this book has its merits, this is very much a missed opportunity.

David Callahan

More info

- *Birdsong: 150 British and Irish Birds and Their Amazing Sounds* by Jonathan Elphick, Jen Pedersen and Lars Svensson (Quadrille, London, 2012).
- 192 pages, 300 colour photographs and illustrations, 184 recordings.
- ISBN 9781849491341. Hbk, £18.99.

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Hong Kong's seasonal delights



MAI Po Nature Reserve came to the birding world's attention in the mid-1980s, when WWF Hong Kong's management created a Minsmere-like scrape as its centrepiece. Almost immediately, Mai Po attracted wader enthusiasts to Hong Kong from all over the world, as it became known that an incredible trio of Spoon-billed Sandpiper, Asian Dowitcher and Nordmann's Greenshank could be watched here each spring.

As the reserve matured so did its facilities, with the construction – in several stages – of a boardwalk complex through the coastal mangroves to three floating hides overlooking, at low tide, the vast expanse of mudflats that is Deep Bay. In the 1990s Mai Po gained RAMSAR status, and so its fame and reputation continued to grow.

It comes as something of a surprise, therefore, to discover

that little has been published that brings together a portrait, either in pictures or words, of the reserve. *Mai Po: the Seasons* does both, and thereby fills a niche. Naturally, I was eager to see this book and consumed its 212 pages at a single sitting.

Its subtitle, 'a Photographic Essay', explains everything. There are 13 pages of informative text, but it is left to the photographs to tell the story of a year in the life of Mai Po. Befitting a book of its genre, it is produced in a large enough format (26 x 24 cm) to allow the images to be presented at their best. This is not always the case, however, as one of the more handsome portraits, that of a Chinese Pond Heron, which spreads onto two pages, is unfortunately spoiled by the page division bisecting the bird's bill.

Following an initial section of 19 pages devoted to Mai Po's landscape, the book proceeds to four chapters of approximately equal length, one for each season commencing with summer. The reader is treated to an array of photographs of plants, insects and spiders, but mostly birds, all taken by the author, the majority during the course of a single year from June 2013 to May 2014.

Inevitably, there are niggles.



Several of the landscapes suffer from unnaturally oversaturated colour. Perhaps not unsurprisingly, for the spring passage of migrants in Hong Kong coincides with dull and rainy weather, few of the birds show a highlight in the eye, a small but vital ingredient that brings a subject to life.

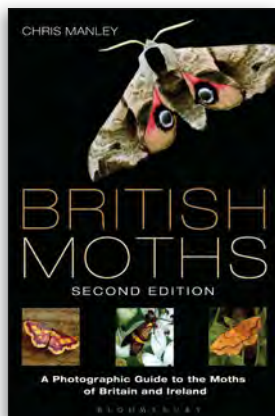
Appreciation of photographs is very much a subjective matter and everyone will hold their

own opinion of the book. What I know for certain is that there are images here, for example, a Eurasian Curlew in flight, a Yellow-bellied Prinia caught in a spider's web and a double-page spread of waders in Deep Bay seemingly threatened by the imposing background of an ever-growing metropolis of Shenzhen, that compare with the best in nature photography. **Ray Tipper**

More info

- *Mai Po: the Seasons – a Photographic Essay* by David Diskin (Accipiter Press, Tai Po, Hong Kong, 2014).
- 212 pages, more than 170 photographs.
- ISBN 9789881509130. Hbk, available from Accipiter Press (www.accipiterpress.com) for HK\$380 (surface mail) or HK\$480 (airmail).

A full guide to Britain's moths



THE publication of a new guide to British moths always arouses great interest within the 'mothing' community. So long starved of any real choice in guides, the recent plethora of publications on the subject both fills that vacuum and also presents the problem of which initial guide the new enthusiast to this fascinating group of insects should invest in.

This book represents the first real attempt to produce a fully comprehensive guide to all the moths of Britain and Ireland. It includes not only the larger moths, but also in practice almost all of the micro-moths. At 350 pages this is no lightweight both in terms of bulk and content.

Every species is illustrated by a high-quality photograph, a brief text and a distribution map. Although most straightforward

species are covered by just a single photograph, the more variable and confusing ones have extra images, peaking at no fewer than 10 of the extremely variable Oak Nycteoline.

Squeezing so much into a single volume does create some limitations: the texts are no longer than a few lines and the maps are very small (good eyesight and a handy magnifying glass would help). Although there is the odd statement I would quibble with – for example, that the Rosy Wave rarely comes to light when I have found that it freely does – the text is generally informative, although necessarily brief.

As a photo guide, this volume will naturally be compared with Sean Clancy's *Moths of Great Britain and Ireland* which has much more extensive texts. However, one of the strengths of this book lies in its layout, with up to 18 photographs per page allowing easy comparison of similar species. More importantly, the inclusion of so many species of micro-moth in a photographic guide for the first time makes this an invaluable addition to any 'moth-ers' library.

At £35.99 this is not a cheap book, but you get an awful lot for your money. Its very completeness and ease of use would make this a particularly excellent first purchase for anyone with a developing interest in moths. **Neil Bowman**



More info

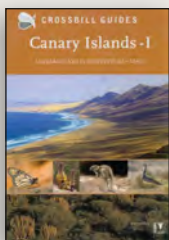
- *British Moths: a Photographic Guide to the Moths of Britain and Ireland* by Chris Manley (Bloomsbury Natural History, London, 2015).
- 352 pages, more than 3,200 colour photos, numerous colour distribution maps.
- ISBN 9781472907707. Hbk, £40.

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BOOKSHELF



Combine a summer holiday to the Canary Islands with some spectacular nature watching with our Book of the Month, says **Heather O'Connor**.



AS the two easternmost Canary Islands, Lanzarote and Fuerteventura are very different from the rest of the archipelago. Despite a combination of volcanic and Saharan-style landscapes, these dry islands hold a wealth of flora and fauna, many of which occur nowhere else in the region or even the world – not least the endemic Canary Islands Stonechat. In addition, the Atlantic Ocean provides inviting opportunities to watch seabirds and dolphins.

As you would expect from the Crossbill Guides series, our Book of the Month *Canary Islands: Vol 1 Fuerteventura and Lanzarote* provides excellent detailed descriptions to all the best sites across both islands, covering the most productive areas for birding, wildflowers, dragonflies and butterflies, seeing marine life and discovering the most remarkable geological sites. It also gives detailed information on tracking down the evolutionary processes that shaped the unique ecology of these isolated Atlantic islands. This is the ideal companion book if you're looking to combine a sun-seeking holiday with some fantastic nature watching.

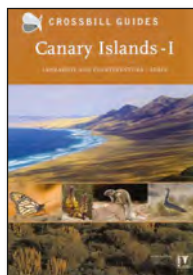
Praised as one of the best butterfly ID books around, the previous edition of *Britain's Butterflies: a Field Guide to the Butterflies of Britain and Ireland* proved to be the go-to field guide for naturalists of all levels. Fully revised and updated, the third edition is released this month, providing all the latest information on every species ever recorded in Britain and Ireland. Covering in detail all of the 59 butterfly species that breed regularly, it will easily enable butterfly-watchers to identify any species they encounter.

To order these titles, plus many more, go to **www.birdwatch.co.uk/store** or use the form opposite. ■



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THESE two easternmost Canary Islands are best known to the general public as winter destinations for sun seekers. However, with their odd mix of volcanic and Saharan-style desert landscapes, the islands support a wealth of flora and fauna – including many Canarian specialities. In this new title from Crossbill Guides, all the detailed information you would expect from the series is included to enable nature-watchers to find the best sites for birdwatching, finding wildflowers, dragonflies and butterflies, seeing marine life and discovering all the most remarkable landscapes. In addition, there are extensive descriptions of all the ecology, geology, history and flora and fauna of the islands.

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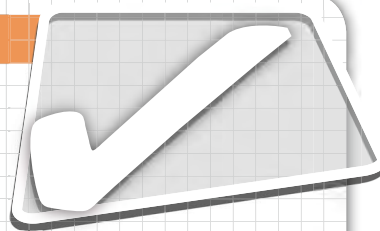
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EXPERT ADVICE



THIS MONTH'S EXPERT PANEL



CHRIS HARBARD
After many years at the RSPB, Chris is now a tour leader, writer and editor, dividing his time between Britain and the USA.



DAVID CALLAHAN
Prior to joining *Birdwatch* as staff writer, David trained as a taxonomist at the Natural History Museum.



GERARD GORMAN
is a well-known birder and author. He has a particular interest in picids and has written extensively about woodpeckers.



KEITH VINICOMBE
is *Birdwatch*'s ID consultant. A keen birder, he has written several books and many articles on identification.



KEVIN WOOD,
is a Principal Research Officer at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, and interested in ecology, behaviour and conservation.



MIKE LANGMAN
is a full-time bird illustrator whose work has featured in numerous books, as well as at almost every RSPB reserve.

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82 Back to basics
In the second part of his series on sketching, Mike Langman provides tips on starting out.

83 Nesting instinct
Learn more about nest building as the breeding season gets into full swing.

83 Spring movement
Find out why 'falls' of migrants occur in spring and which species to look out for.

84 Your questions answered
Our panel of experts tackles your latest avian conundrums.

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Numbers of songbirds killed on a UK military base in Cyprus reaches record levels.

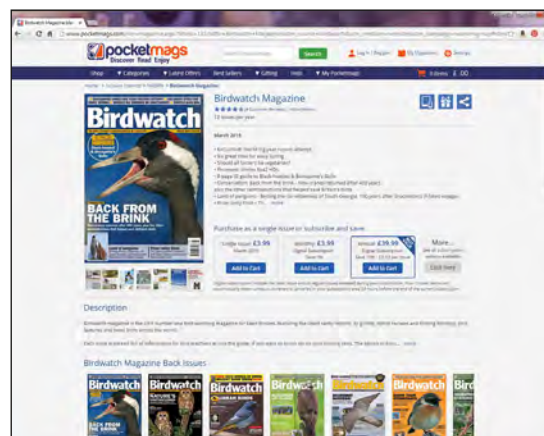
87 Display case
Birds will be trying to attract mates this month; find out more about their courtship displays.

HOW TO ...

Make the most of the digital edition

Technology can improve your birding skills and knowledge, and this even applies to your favourite birding magazine. **Rebecca Armstrong** explains how to download and get the best out of the digital editions of *Birdwatch*.

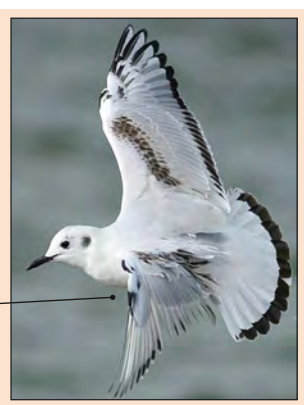
THE digital editions of *Birdwatch* really bring the magazine to life, with video footage and sound files of selected species enhancing the content which you know so well from printed issues. These digital editions are available via an app in iTunes (for iPads and iPhones), Google Play (for Android platforms) and Pocketmags (for PCs and laptops). This easy-to-follow guide is all you need to get started. See page 54 for more details.



First you need to download the app to your device. If using an iPad or iPhone, go to the App Store and search for *Birdwatch* (left). On an Android tablet or phone, search for *Birdwatch* in the Google Play Store (centre). Then tap 'Install' to download the app. The app is free and gives access to a sample issue of the magazine. If you want to access the digital editions via a computer, go to www.pocketmags.com/birdwatch (right) and purchase the issues.



Once you've downloaded the app, you can access digital issues going all the way back to February 2004 – print versions of back issues are no longer routinely available. Older copies cost just £2.99, so this is a great way to fill any gaps in your collection. For each issue there is a free list of contents and preview. In the app, you can purchase single editions or subscriptions for six months or 12 months. These cost £3.99, £19.99 and £39.99 respectively, and compare favourably with the print edition of the magazine, which costs £4.10. Digital issues are published before the print version, and you receive a push notification when the issue becomes available.



Now you've got access to the issue, there are three ways to find your way around. Swipe backwards or forwards to go through page by page. You can also use page jumps. Wherever you see a page reference, like on the Contents page (far left), tap it to be taken directly to that page. Go to a particular page by tapping near the bottom of the screen to bring up the navigation bar (centre left). Use the slider to move to the page in question and then tap to select it. Zoom in by using thumb and forefinger – this is particularly useful for seeing finer plumage detail on ID photos (centre right and right).



Another benefit of the digital edition is that web and email addresses are 'live'. If, for example, a news story looks interesting, tap the URL to be taken to the site in your browser (left and centre left). To return to the issue once you've read the story, tap 'close'. You can also directly access your email account. Tap any email address, then tap the 'forward' icon (centre right and right) to open your email provider.



You can access bonus material such as video and sound files (please note, however, that issues prior to November 2012 do not have these extras). We're constantly improving our digital offerings, and the latest innovation is the use of hot-spots. The above two icons denote a hot-spot; you will find them throughout the digital magazine. Tap the icon to reveal either video (left) or a sound file (right). Once the media has finished playing, swipe forwards and then backwards again to make the player disappear. ■

HOW TO ...

Make great field sketches

THE most important element of making even the most basic field sketch is observation. Notes don't have to be sketches, but a drawing will ensure every part of the bird is looked at – it's easy to miss something in written notes.

'But I'm not an artist' is the commonly used get-out clause for most birders to not attempt field sketching. Initial scribbles may not be works of art but with

a little practice they can look something like the bird being watched.

If you have so far managed to avoid making a genuine field sketch, start with the tried and trusted two circles approach. Begin with the body, and follow up with the head. This technique provides an outline on which to add other features, while ensuring the sketch fits on the

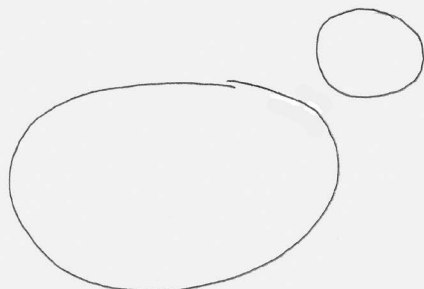
page. Start on something from the comfort of your own home; choose a bird that is close or large and relatively stationary – preferably all of these! A Woodpigeon is perfect.

Your first few attempts are likely to be discarded. You might get the proportions wrong or not properly observe additional field marks. Don't give up; you may already have learnt more about

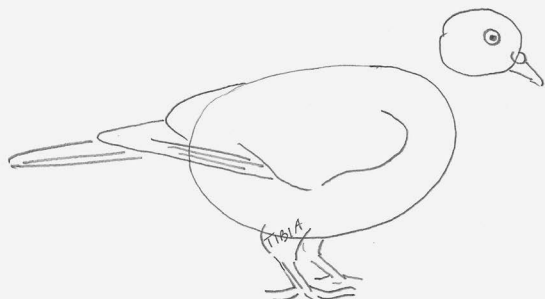
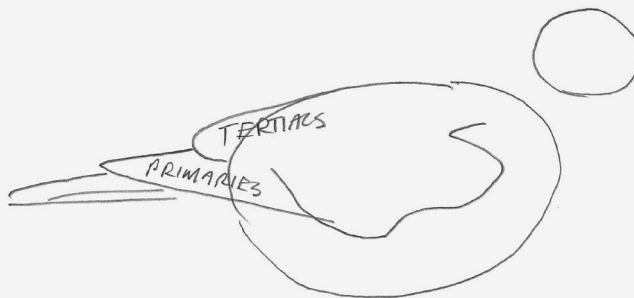
your subject's plumage and shape than you have in years of birding. Try the exercise again on the same bird. Your note-making and observation skills will improve every time, together with your speed in accomplishing the task.

Next month: in the field – handling binoculars or a telescope with a notebook and pencil, and tackling a less familiar species. ■

1 Start with two ovals: a big body with a small head slightly up and forward of body. Study the proportions to get the relative sizes and distances of the two ovals correct.



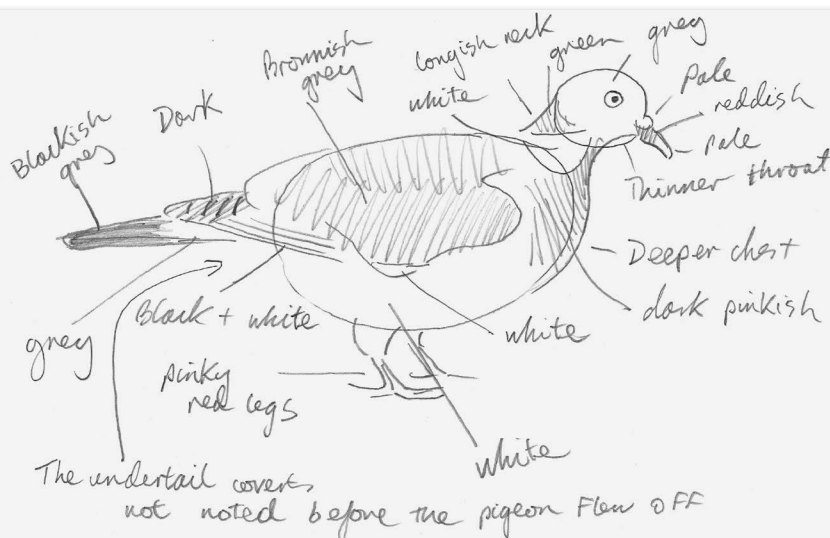
2 Add wings and a tail: look how far the primaries extend beyond the tertials, and check how long the tail is in relation to the wings.



3 Note the white patch on the wings of this Woodpigeon. The legs are short with a thick feathered tibia; they are a bright pinkish red. The toes are hidden in the grass; leave them off – only sketch what you see. The bill is an odd shape and angled down; the eye is smallish and pale.



4 There is an obvious white neck collar – include this in your sketch. See how the neck joins the body, and perhaps add a bit more chest. The tail-end is blackish.



5 Now finish off with more plumage notes. Don't worry if you don't know the topographical terms – in time you will get to know the names of the various body parts on a bird. The smooth uniform feathering of Woodpigeon's upperparts makes study and inclusion of feather tracts difficult, so leave them off – don't use your imagination.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

Construction works

Long-tailed Tits construct an elaborate nest from moss, lichen and spider webs. To help to insulate the nest, the birds will line it with more than 1,500 feathers.



LISA GEOGHEGAN

AS the breeding season begins, many birds are occupied with the process of nest construction. The study of birds' nests is called caliology, from the Greek *kalios* for nest. With cup-shaped nests, the intricacy of the structure, and the ability to build it, seem incredible, especially when realising that a one-year-old bird, nesting for the first time, will have never seen a nest being built.

Research has shown that while the actual process of nest building may be instinctive, a

bird will learn to choose the best materials for the job. For the nest structure, materials that provide a sturdy framework will be selected over anything more flimsy. Local materials will be used to enable the finished nest to blend in more readily with its surroundings.

Studies on weavers, which produce large and complex structures, reveal that they use building methods that vary greatly during the initial stages, with little repeated behaviour suggesting that some actions may be learned

during the building process.

One main function of nests is to provide the birds and their eggs and young with adequate protection, especially from variations in temperature, as well as from rain and wind. Blue and Long-tailed Tits are known to vary the amounts of feathers they use to keep the temperature inside the nest at the right level. Studies on cup-shaped nests have shown that the structural support provided by the nest is the main reason for the design, rather than

its insulating properties, although the latter will be the reason for some of the aspects of nest building.

While appearing intricate, most nests are built simply, as is shown by Garden Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat and Blackcap, which build nests almost entirely of grass stems. The tubular grass stems will not bend in a smooth curve, so to produce the desired round shape the bird will kink the grass stem several times into a polygonal form and then arrange large numbers of these on top of each other to form a cup. Small shapes are used to begin with and these gradually become larger and interlock to create a sturdy structure.

Although small birds use their beaks for picking up materials and for building their nests, it is not possible to determine the type of nest a bird will build by looking at its beak. There is also no clear correlation between a bird's size and its nest size. While a hummingbird only needs a tiny cup, which is half of its weight and can be easily disguised, the nest of a larger bird is not so easy to hide. The nest of a Magpie, for example, is large and heavy, up to 20 times the weight of the bird. ■

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

Spring in their flight

APART from the direction of travel, is there any difference between spring and autumn migration? The answer is a resounding yes.

In autumn, a large proportion of birds are migrating for the first time, and many of these inexperienced youngsters do not survive the journey. Spring migrants have already made it in one direction, and so have a greater ability to negotiate and survive the rigorous trip. In spring, the weather can help birds and the journey time is usually shorter as they know where they are returning to, so are less likely to get lost.

This means that there are likely to be fewer vagrants from far afield, but in the right conditions spectacular arrivals can happen. Sometimes bad weather can cause a hold-up along the migration route, and when these conditions clear up suddenly, large numbers of birds start moving again, arriving in Britain *en masse*. Sometimes this may involve unusual species that overshoot their breeding areas, such as Red-rumped Swallow, Alpine Swift or Great Spotted Cuckoo.

Strong easterly winds may cause birds which normally migrate along the European coast to be blown across the North Sea to the east coasts of Britain – species such as Bluethroat, Red-backed Shrike and Wryneck. Combined with the right weather to bring birds over, rainy or overcast conditions will help to ground migrating birds, providing birders with a chance to find the scarcer ones. Keep an eye on the weather maps and get out there whenever these sorts of weather patterns occur. ■

The right weather conditions could deposit large numbers of migrating birds on British coasts. Keep your eyes open for something much rarer such as Great Spotted Cuckoo.



OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Q I've attached a photograph of what I believe to be a White Stork, which I saw over the Deeping Lakes Reserve, South Lincolnshire, at lunchtime on Saturday 21 February 2015. The stork was being harried by two or three Black-headed Gulls and was over the reserve for approximately five minutes before heading off east along the River Welland. I would be most grateful if your experts could confirm the identification and how usual would it be to see one in this location.

David Raines, via email

A David Callahan replies: "This very large bird's dagger-like red bill, white head, body and underwings, completely black flight feathers and long pink legs add up to it being one species only: White Stork. So well done on discovering an individual which remained unreported by the news services until it was put out by BirdGuides after you sent these photos to us.

However, it is hard to tell if this is a genuinely wild bird. February is a very unusual month for this species to occur, despite there being a small number in residence across the Channel (most of the European population migrates south to Africa for the winter). A closer look at the bird's legs reveals a very thin grey mark on its right 'ankle' which may be a ring. This would probably indicate a captive origin, but it's too difficult to see enough detail to confirm this. This bird will most likely remain 'of unknown origin', unless it shows up again and reveals the necessary details." ■



Q I took these photos of Mute Swans on 1 March, and thought it very unusual to have three swans together performing a mating display. This is the first time that I have seen this. Can you tell me what is going on? Kevin Bowers, via email

A Kevin Wood, Principal Research Officer at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT), replies: "Swans are famously monogamous and that's borne out by years of research. I've never seen three-way courtship displays or mating attempts like this, or even seen it mentioned



in the literature. Mute Swans are highly territorial when breeding, so normally wouldn't tolerate another swan being anywhere near them, let alone involved.

"The species has occasionally been caught 'playing away', but that has always been separate from the other partner. It's possible that the three birds are related. The odd rare incestuous relationship between a parent and one of its offspring has been reported, but in those cases the other parent had died so, again, it's been a pairing rather than a threesome. It's certainly fascinating and unusual behaviour."

The Big Question: #weaselpecker!

Q The online and newspaper worlds went wild for the photos of a Weasel attacking a Green Woodpecker, which then took flight. Taken by Martin Le-May in Hornchurch CP, Greater London/Essex, on 3 March, the best of the images (right) went viral. However, few addressed the question of how usual this behaviour is in Weasel. Has this mustelid been known to predate Green Woodpecker before, and which other animals are known to predate the species?

A Gerard Gorman, author of *Woodpeckers of Europe and Woodpeckers of the World*, replies: "I know of no records of Weasel predated Green Woodpecker. However, as the bird often feeds on the ground, I suspect that it may be attacked by ground predators such as mustelids, domestic and wild cats, and Fox sometimes. I have seen cats stalk and attack Green Woodpecker in Budapest a few times, but without success. The woodpecker usually takes flight, heads for tree cover and makes alarm calls when threatened. In addition, when Goshawk and Sparrowhawk have flown by, I have seen Green Woodpecker crouch down to the ground and 'freeze'." ■



MARTIN LE-MAY

Q I took photos of what looked like a good candidate for 'Lesser Canada Goose' at Hanningfield Reservoir, Essex, on 9 February (below right). Interestingly, it appeared on the same day that a party of six Barnacle Geese returned to the site. The Barnacles are annual visitors at this time, and their arrival was within a week of their appearance in 2014. The Barnacles and this putative *parvipes* associated with a flock of feral Canada Geese on the grazing meadow adjacent to the EWT reserve. None of the Barnacles was ringed. You can see that the goose was certainly small when judged against Mallard. There is no chance of acceptance, of course. However, do you have any thoughts on whether the ID of *parvipes* is correct? David Jobbins, via email

A Keith Vinicombe, Birdwatch ID consultant, replies: "As you know, these small geese are difficult! The obvious problem with these photos is that there aren't any 'ordinary' Canada or Barnacle Geese for comparison, so it's difficult to gauge the bird's exact size. However, it is obviously small, so it's clearly not *canadensis*. To me, the bird looks very similar to one at Chew Valley Lake, Somerset, in 2010 which was about 80-90 per cent of the size of the accompanying *canadensis*, with a steeper forehead when relaxed. It tended to hold its head and neck sloping forward. It was very pale breasted (like the Hanningfield bird) and also had the same distinctive narrow, pointed white facial patch. The bill was longer than *hutchinsii* Cackling Goose, appearing similar to the Hanningfield bird, judging by the photos. Our bird was eventually caught in the annual Canada Goose round-up and the most significant measurement was that it weighed only 3.4 kilos. According to *BWP*, *canadensis* averages 4.9 kilos (male) and 4.4 kilos (female).

"To cut to the chase, I would say that the Hanningfield bird looks pretty

similar to our Chew bird and closest to *parvipes* or 'Lesser Canada Goose' (not to be confused with Cackling Goose, of course). Todd's Canada Goose (of the subspecies *interior*) is also smaller than *canadensis*, but it is closer in size and tends to be darker breasted. We've got a couple of Todd's types at Chew at the moment and they do look distinctly darker than this Hanningfield bird.

"Given that the Hanningfield bird was so approachable, I suppose one has to assume it was an escape. One thing is for sure: the Rarities Committee would never accept it!" ■



Have you got a question for our experts?

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www.facebook.com/birdwatchmagazine, on our

forums at www.birdwatch.co.uk/forums, or by emailing editorial@birdwatch.co.uk or by writing

in to: **Your Questions Answered, Birdwatch, The Chocolate Factory, 5 Clarendon Road, London N22 6XJ.**

Songbirds killed on UK military base in Cyprus reach record levels

THE numbers of trapped songbirds illegally killed on a British military base in Cyprus last autumn reached an estimated 900,000 birds – the highest level recorded in 12 years.

This was according to the latest RSPB-funded research of trapping activity on the Dhekelia Sovereign Base Area, close to the tourist hot-spot of Ayia Napa, and happened despite the publicity the killings have received over the last couple of years.

The RSPB and BirdLife Cyprus are urging Base Area authorities to continue the positive start made late last year to clamp down on illegal trappers by removing the artificially planted scrub, which is used as cover for their activities. The acacia scrub attracts vast numbers of migrating songbirds, which move between Europe and

Africa each autumn.

Trapping of songbirds for use in the local and expensive delicacy of *ambelopoulia* on Cyprus was practised for many centuries, but it was outlawed in 1974. Unfortunately, organised crime now seems to be driving this illegal activity, which is thought to be worth millions of Euros every autumn.

BirdLife Cyprus and the RSPB have been monitoring illegal trapping activity on the British military base at Dhekelia since 2002. The figures for last autumn reveal that 2014 was the worst year on record, with an estimated 900,000 birds being killed, equivalent to almost 15,000 songbirds a day during the September-October period. The figures are now three times higher than when monitoring

started in 2002.

The RSPB's International Director, Dr Tim Stowe, said: "The illegal trapping of songbirds on the British military base has

escalated and we are urging the Ministry of Defence and the Base Area authorities to resolve it before this autumn's migration." ■

• bit.ly/bw274cyprus



Cyprus Warbler is one of two endemic Cypriot passerines, both of which end up in *ambelopoulia*.

ENSIND (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)



News round-up

MAIN STORY Babbler rediscovered in Myanmar

A scientific team has rediscovered a bird thought extinct in Myanmar, which may turn out to be a full species.

• bit.ly/bw274babbler

EU environmental policy denounced by new report

An official report on the European environment comes to damning

conclusions on the European Union's management and protection of its natural resources.

• bit.ly/bw274Eureport

Zapata Rail rediscovered after 40 years?

BirdLife ornithologists are convinced they have rediscovered a rare Cuban rail species, thought for more than four decades to have possibly gone extinct.

• bit.ly/bw274zapatarail

In the digital edition

APRIL'S digital edition has plenty of extra materials, including:

- Footage and sounds of Spotted, Little and Baillon's Crakes.
- Video of rarities and scarcities from across the region.
- Extra movie clips of Common Cuckoo and White-tailed Eagle.
- Bonus content for even more selected species featured in the magazine.

The digital edition is available for PC, Mac, iPhone/iPad and Android. Sample editions are free, and subscriptions or single issues can be purchased. Visit www.pocketmags.com/birdwatch to find out more, and see the tutorial on pages 80-81. ■

LISTCHECK

Updating avian taxonomy

Transformer pipits

THE extent to which some passerines can change their appearance to suit their environments and habitats has been revealed in a dramatic way by the DNA analysis of two geographically widely separated island endemics.

The species – Madanga *Madanga ruficollis* of Buru (Wallacea), Indonesia, and São Tomé Shorttail, *Amaurocichla bocagii*, from São Tomé, Gulf of Guinea – will now both have to be reclassified as pipits and wagtails, despite formerly being thought of as a white-eye and Old World warbler respectively.

Using already mostly pre-existing DNA sequences, a mainly Scandinavian team analysed the two unusual species along with pipits and wagtails and representatives of most other songbird lineages. São Tomé Shorttail came out as a highly derived form closest to Cape Wagtail *Motacilla capensis*, while Madanga was a sister species to the Alpine Pipit *Anthus gutturalis* of Papua New Guinea. These widely disparate species show that there may be many more surprises in store among the passerines as molecular analysis progresses. ■



It has now been shown that Madanga, found in Indonesia, despite resembling a flycatcher or chat, is actually a morphologically aberrant pipit or wagtail.

ROB HUTCHINSON (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)

Reference

• Alström, P, Jönsson, K A, Fjeldså, J, Ödeen, A, Ericson, P G P, and Irestedt, M. 2015. Dramatic niche shifts and morphological change in two insular bird species. *Royal Society Open Science* 2: 140364. [dx.doi.org/10.1098/rsos.140364](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.140364).



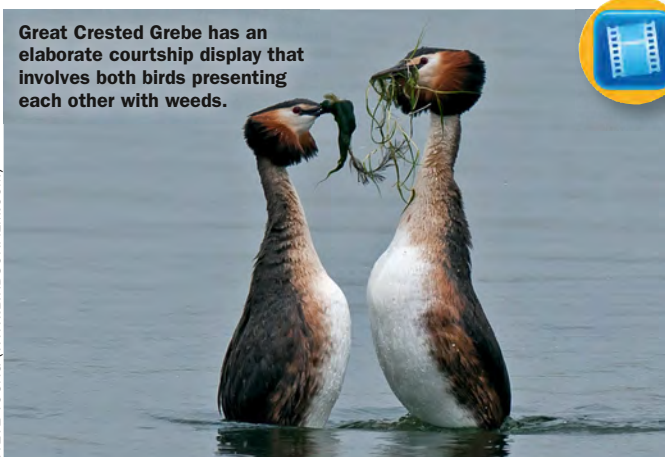
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

Unmissable displays

Great Crested Grebe has an elaborate courtship display that involves both birds presenting each other with weeds.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)



SPRING is a time of courtship among birds, when one or both birds show off to attract a mate, or strengthen an existing pair bond. Here are nine species with spectacular displays – why not try to see them all this month?

Great Crested Grebe

The courtship display of Great Crested Grebe is one of the truly great sights among British birds. Seen from February into May, it consists of a number of phases involving the birds raising their crests and shaking their heads, ritually presenting one another with weed while rising vertically out of the water. Chases across the water occur, as do dances, with the cheek and nape feathers fanned out and heads flicked back.

Common Eider

The courtship of Common Eider begins as early as September, but

is at its most intense in spring. The drakes throw back their heads and make a cooing *ah-oo* call. Eider strongholds include the Farne Islands, Northumberland, and the Aberdeenshire coast.

Black Grouse

This species' courtship display takes place at a lek, where several males compete to outperform one another in front of an audience of females. This display peaks in April and May and is best observed at dawn. Often called '*roo-kooing*' because of the sound they make, the males, or 'blackcocks', crouch and circle around with their tails fanned out, wings extended and red head wattles inflated, giving their bubbling calls. The RSPB offers opportunities to watch this display from 22 March 2015 at a lek in North Wales; see www.rspb.org.uk, and also page 29.

Hen Harrier

During the breeding season, male Hen Harriers perform a dramatic aerial display known as 'skydancing'. These spectacular aerobatics take place from March and involve 'roller-coaster' chases and steep dives, in which the bird turns right over in flight, all in an effort to impress the watching female. Best observed on nature reserves in Wales, Scotland and the Isle of Man.

Northern Lapwing

With slow, flapping wing-beats, a male Northern Lapwing flies up steeply before going round in circles with a zigzagging flight, twisting from side to side. The wings make a 'thrumming' noise all the while. The bird then climbs while calling its characteristic *pee-wit* phrase, before suddenly dropping, tumbling and plunging downwards. All of this may be repeated several times before it finally lands. The display can be watched from February until June in some areas.

Common Snipe

The spring courtship displays of Common Snipe have to be seen and heard. Male birds fly up high along a circular route and perform dives during which they spread their outer tail feathers which vibrate to make a throbbing noise known as 'drumming', 'bleating' or 'winnowing'. Listen and watch for this display from April through to August.

Eurasian Curlew

The bubbling 'song' of Eurasian Curlew is given in display flight from February, as soon as it returns to its breeding grounds, and lasts until July. It has a characteristic undulating display flight which starts off level, rising steeply with fluttering wing-beats, hovering, and then 'parachuting' down with wings held up, all accompanied by the distinctive song.

Raven

This largest of crows is a master of the air, and the sight of a pair in display is breathtaking. They will fly close together, with wing-tips almost touching, then one bird will dive and twist and roll, tumbling through the air. Occasionally a bird will turn over and fly upside down, sometimes for a considerable distance. Displays can take place in winter and groups of young birds can be seen practising at almost any time of year.

Tree Pipit

Pipits share a common display which involves a 'parachuting' song flight, and perhaps the most evocative of these is that of Tree Pipit. As the males start to arrive in early April, they quickly establish a territory by means of a song flight which begins before sunrise. Flying up steeply to a height of about 30 m, a bird will then descend with its wings outspread, legs dangling and tail cocked, while singing loudly, the whole song taking about six seconds. ■

SUNDAY HIGH TIDES IN APRIL

Full moon date is Saturday 4 April

	5th	12th	19th	26th
Exe Estuary (Starcross)	08.27	00.18	08.02	00.31
Devon	20.43	12.52	20.24	13.04
Poole Harbour (town quay)	02.19	03.18	10.17	03.41
Dorset	10.26	16.54	22.40	17.38
Langstone Harbour (Northney)	01.00	05.40	00.28	05.56
Hampshire	13.16	18.25	12.51	18.39
Thames Estuary (Sheerness)	01.53	06.39	01.29	06.54
Kent	14.14	19.05	13.57	19.13
London Bridge	03.12	07.50	02.47	08.04
Greater London	15.33	20.16	15.14	20.22
Colne Estuary (Wivenhoe)	01.29	06.10	01.01	06.26
Essex	13.51	18.40	13.32	18.50
Blakeney Harbour	08.07	00.40	07.39	01.02
Norfolk	20.21	13.11	20.00	13.30
Hunstanton	07.54	00.10	07.28	00.31
Norfolk	20.04	12.35	19.46	12.49
Blacktoft	08.15	00.44	07.47	01.06
Yorkshire	20.29	13.13	20.08	13.30

	5th	12th	19th	26th
Teesmouth	05.07	09.49	04.45	10.05
Durham/Yorkshire	17.17	22.43	17.02	23.02
Holy Island	03.54	08.28	03.28	08.42
Northumberland	16.08	21.12	15.51	21.25
Firth of Forth (Cockenzie)	04.12	08.42	03.56	08.55
Lothian	16.22	21.35	16.15	21.51
Morecambe Bay	00.34	05.19	00.08	05.37
Lancashire	12.48	18.00	12.29	18.18
Dee Estuary (Hilbre)	00.11	04.58	–	05.17
Cheshire	12.24	17.41	12.03	18.00
Loughor Estuary (Burry Port)	07.45	00.05	07.23	00.25
Carmarthenshire	20.01	12.44	19.45	13.02
Severn Estuary (Berkeley)	09.27	01.40	09.00	01.58
Gloucestershire	21.42	14.13	21.22	14.30
Belfast	00.22	05.12	–	05.27
Co Down	12.33	17.59	12.14	18.16
Dublin (North Wall)	00.57	05.43	00.38	05.58
Co Dublin	13.08	18.34	12.58	18.50



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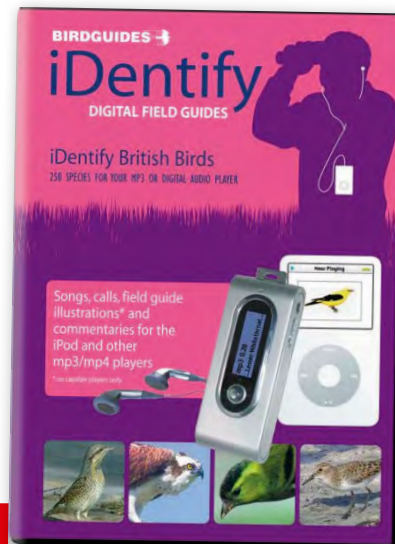


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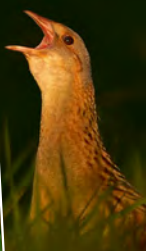
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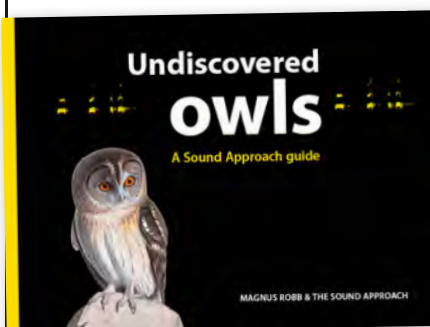
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- Bluethroat is one of Britain's most colourful and desirable scarce migrants, but even gaudy males are not always easy to assign to subspecies. Andy Stoddart looks at the ID of this delightful chat in all its guises.
- It's election time, but which party should get your vote when it comes to conservation, the countryside and protecting birds? David Callahan examines the manifesto promises of the main parties ahead of the vote on 7 May.
- Originally considered a new species from the Baltic, so-called Polish Mute Swans confounded early ornithologists and still remain poorly known to many of today's birders. Moss Taylor explains all.



■ In an extract from their new book *Undiscovered Owls*, Magnus Robb and The Sound Approach examine the calls of one of Europe's most widespread owls, explain why there are actually two species

involved, and show how to hear the difference. Find out which species they're talking about – and get an **exclusive free sample CD** featuring 22 tracks of owl vocalisations.

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On a diet

I would like to make a couple of points about Rebecca Armstrong's stance on vegetarianism (see last month's *Birdwatch*, pages 55-58).

Rebecca's statements often seem to revolve around the traditional vegetarian targets of steaks and beefburgers, but much meat consumed in the world comes from chickens. These birds convert plant energy into protein very efficiently and make a valuable contribution to the often limited diets of billions of the world's poor people. If one can shop at Waitrose for vegetarian ingredients, then giving up meat may not seem much of an issue. If, however, you are one of the billions who already have an enforced more-or-less vegetarian diet, then you might be justified in taking exception to 'green' suggestions from wealthier parts of the world about what forms of protein you should be eating.

My second point relates to the hard-to-understand equation made in the article between the supply of clean drinking water to poor people in places like Brazil, and the supposed consumption of Brazilian water in soy imported into Britain. If poor people in Brazil don't have clean water, then this is likely to be a poverty-related water supply issue rather than anything to do with water shortages resulting from Western meat

consumption. I find these 'water embodied in food' arguments to be abstruse – if I pop down to Tesco for a packet of frozen peas, am I therefore depriving the inhabitants of Lincolnshire of their water entitlements? Some of these lines of argument deserve more critical scrutiny than they currently typically receive.

Roger Smith, via email

• **Rebecca Armstrong replies:**
"Many thanks for your response, Roger. We published this debate in the hope that it would get our readers thinking, so it's nice to see that it's worked."

"Most of what I wrote referred to livestock and meat consumption as a whole, taking cattle as the worst offender. Chicken production also contributes to climate change, deforestation and water use. This is lower than beef production, but still higher than vegetables and pulses."

"As for the many billions of people who already follow a vegetarian diet, by choice or circumstance, they weren't the 'target' of the article. However, pulses are also an excellent source of protein and much cheaper than meat. Water is a finite resource, and if it's being used for livestock and feed, then it isn't available for human consumption. Does it not make sense to free up some of that water destined for livestock production for human use?"

"I'd be interested to hear views on vegetarianism from more readers. Please do write in!"

100th Osprey

I do volunteer work at Loch Garten RSPB every year, and took this photo of a male Osprey bringing in a fish for its family (see below) last spring. The female of this pair is called 'EJ' and last year they managed to fledge three chicks, which we named Millicent, Seasca and Drue.

Millicent was the 100th

Osprey chick to fledge at Loch Garten, and she and Seasca were fitted with satellite tags so they could be tracked on their migration south. Unfortunately Seasca appears to have perished in August but Millicent is still doing well. Its latest position can be seen on the Loch Garten blog at bit.ly/lochgarten.

Valerie Webber, via email



This young female Kestrel flew into Toby Coulson's French windows in Cobham, Surrey, and stunned itself. While it recovered, he was able to get within 2 m of it to take this picture.



This action shot of a hungry Blue Tit making a bee-line to a garden feeder was taken by David Melia.

The right rooster

I enjoyed reading 'The tree of life' article in your February issue (*Birdwatch* 272: 53-56), and would love to see more items concentrating on scientific discoveries. However, I noticed at the end of the article that there is an image of a 'Red Jungle Fowl' which is actually a cock Sri Lanka Jungle Fowl, like this one (top right), photographed in Sinharaja Forest reserve, Sri Lanka, last December.

Doug Kelson, via email

• **Thanks for pointing out this mistake, which arose from a mislabelled image file. A 'real' Red Jungle Fowl is depicted bottom right.**

DAVID Callahan's fully referenced look at new thinking on the origins and ancestry of birds (*Birdwatch*, February) was the magazine at its best! He mentions that Red Jungle Fowl, aka chicken, is the closest of living birds to non-avian dinosaurs. What a long wait it had for *Homo sapiens* to evolve, in order to be able to demonstrate its ability, not only to reverse its natural inclination to hide its eggs from the gaze of predators but, furthermore, to positively advertise their presence with helpful accompanying vocalisations – cock-a-doodle-doo! I've had a couple of strokes and this email has taken a week of frustrated fun to write. You lot at *Birdwatch* are a lifeline to the heretofore!

Anthony Maynard, via email



DOUG KELSON

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• **The Ban Driven Grouse Shooting petition is now approaching 21,200 signatures, and there is just enough time left to contribute:**

@MarkAvery:

"Thank you @BirdwatchExtra for helping to get ow.ly/K43VP past 21k signatures! Three weeks left for more."

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• **The widespread dissemination of the #weaselpecker photo (see page 85) and the further publication of pictures of a Grey Heron eating a Stoat which was said to have attacked it encouraged many comments from readers:**

Chris Galvin: "The world has gone Weasel mad."

Thorsten Odinson: "Are you sure it was not the opposite (the Grey Heron attacked and the Stoat was only trying to defend itself)?"

David Kelly: "Nature can be brutal."

Bjanka Praljiacic: "Another strange story related to Weasel – either we have much more vigilant observers or the poor Weasels are desperate for food."

Further news that numbers of illegally killed birds at a British military base in Cyprus has peaked at 900,00 also caused comment:

David Kelly: "900K – this is abhorrent. Why will the EU interfering morons not stop this? If the UK were doing this we would be fined."

Steve Carter: "EU not fit for purpose! STOP the slaughter of birds!"

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STEVE YOUNG'S PHOTO CHALLENGE

The winner



FEBRUARY'S photo challenge was to capture images of owls.

Steve Young said: "When I set this photo challenge I did hope and think that it would be a popular one, but I didn't realise quite how popular! A record number of entries was received, mostly of expected species such as Barn and Short-eared Owl, but there were also a number from overseas such as White-faced Scops Owl, showing that owls are popular wherever our readers' travels take them."

Some of the flight shots submitted suffered from low shutter speeds and high ISO settings, but birds that appear very late in the day have to be photographed somehow and sometimes an image to remember the day by is better than none at all.

After much deliberation I've selected this lovely portrait of a Short-eared Owl by John Richardson as the winning shot; taken in lovely light, on an attractive perch and with an uncluttered background, this is a beautiful image and wins John this month's prize of *Taking Flight* by Michael Warren. Keep those entries coming – the more we have the better the competition."

• **Turn to page 72 to find out about this month's photo challenge.**



MARK COCKER

Land sharing

The rolling *dehesas* of Iberia provide some of the most bird-rich landscapes in Europe, says **Mark Cocker**. But this wildlife-friendly habitat is created and managed by man.

I'm proposing a thought experiment for *Birdwatch* readers: a list of favourite habitats. I wouldn't like to second guess all the candidates for the top slot, but I'll suggest an area that could qualify as the best of European landscapes.

I've visited the *dehesas* of south-western Spain and eastern Portugal about 15 times, but this January's trip was the first occasion I'd seen it in winter. Even without those astonishing carpets of wildflowers that are such a feature of the Extremaduran spring, the landscape seemed as full of vibrant beauty – and birds – as on every other trip.

When I first set eyes on Extremadura's *dehesa* almost 35 years ago I was mesmerised not just by the flowing contours of the plains but also the mathematical precision with which unseen Spanish hands had spaced out an endless 'forest' of evergreen oaks.

Each tree is laid out in identical manner. The top is reduced to four main branches spreading to the four points of the compass. The sum effect of this regime is that every tree looks like a green umbrella. Replicate it a million times and you have a sense of one of Europe's ultimate wildlife landscapes.

Bird rich

At any one moment almost anywhere in Extremadura the sky is full of raptors. Hundreds of birds of at least 10 species are barely even noteworthy. There are often so many vultures over what can seem like acacia savannah that it often feels more like tropical Africa than temperate Europe.

One of its main features is the presence of Black Vultures in densities found nowhere else on Earth. Even better, the population of this once threatened bird has surged in recent decades. When I first visited Extremadura, there were 90 pairs; today there are 10 times that number. The other headline species – if one sets aside for a moment Great and Little Bustards – is Spanish Imperial Eagle. Half a century ago this qualified as one of the world's rarest birds of prey, with just 30 pairs left anywhere; now there are 50 pairs in Extremadura alone.

What makes *dehesa* so deeply fulfilling, however, is the commonplace birds and their



MARTIN KELSEY

The Extremaduran *dehesa* is a working landscape managed for agriculture, yet it is home to a huge abundance of birdlife, including vultures, eagles and massive flocks of sparrows and larks.

“Spanish Imperial Eagle was once one of the world's rarest birds of prey, with just 30 pairs left anywhere. Now there are 50 pairs in Extremadura alone”

sheer abundance. Features that we have forgotten or lost from Britain, such as massive flocks of sparrows and larks, are still embedded in this glorious farmland. One moment during my last visit that gave me huge pleasure was a brief stop by a feedlot. There was a dense, endlessly recycling mixed flock of Spotless Starlings, Corn Buntings, sparrows, larks and finches.

What seals *dehesa* as the ultimate habitat is that it is not some carefully preserved national park barricaded behind a fortress of acronyms and official designations. It's a working landscape that yields six main harvests. It is cattle and sheep pasture, cropland and a source of charcoal or firewood. Its key speciality results from those billions of acorns, which fatten the region's breed of black pigs. Finally, the cork oaks produce the bottle stopper which makes that wonderful sound when wine is opened.

Dehesa is more than a bird habitat. It is a hope-filled model of what human land-use can be: a gloriously creative transaction between ourselves and nature. ■

We're sorry to say that this is Mark Cocker's final column in the present series. We'd like to take this opportunity to thank him for his wonderful contributions over the years, and also reassure readers that he will continue to appear occasionally in the magazine.



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